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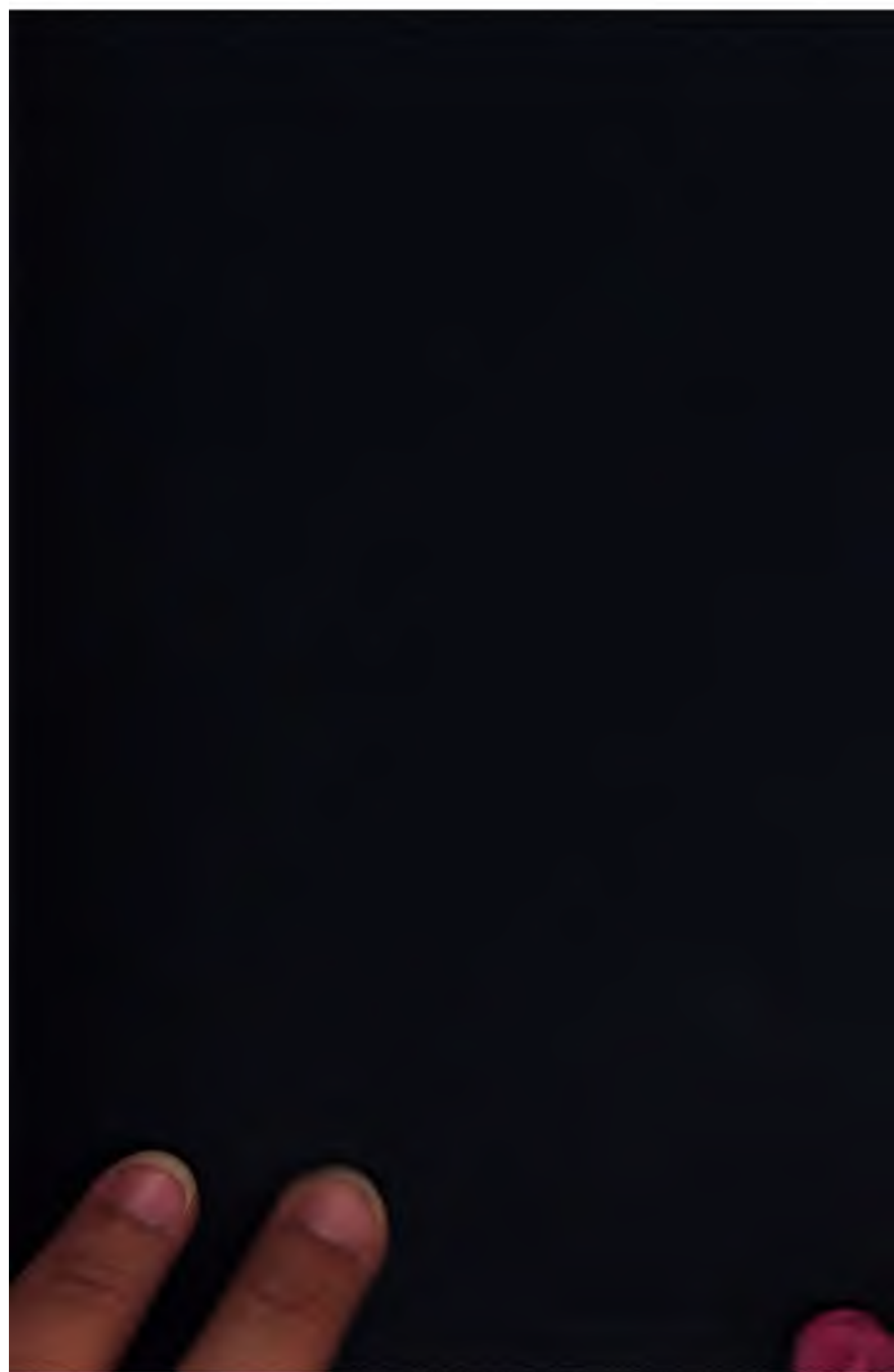
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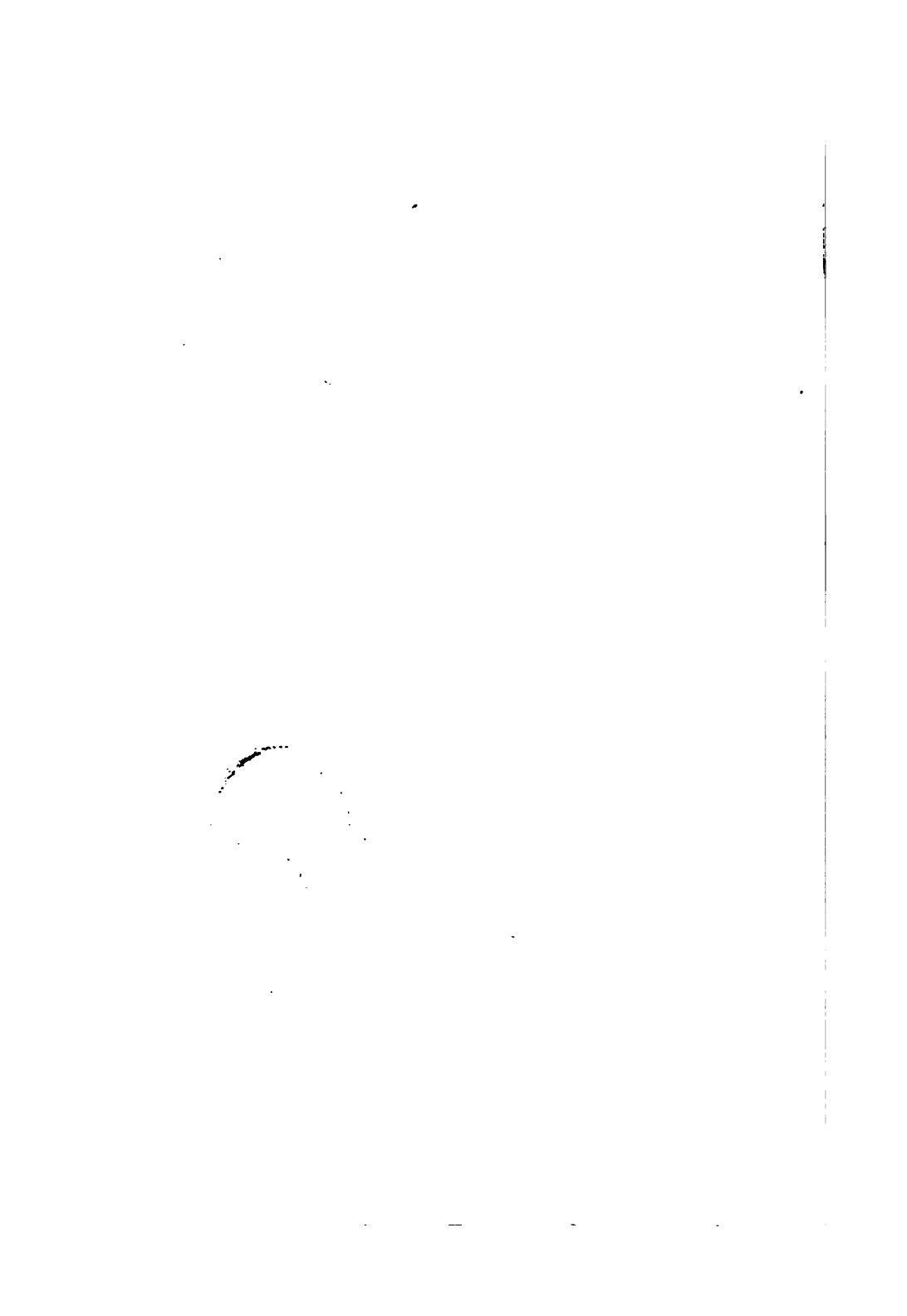


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H A G A R.

VOL. I.



H A G A R.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

“ST. OLAVE’S,” “JANITA’S CROSS,”

“META’S FAITH,”

&c. &c.

“She departed, and wandered in the wilderness.”

“All journeys end in welcomes to the weary—
And heaven, the heart’s true home, is won at last.”

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



LONDON:

HURST AND BLACKETT, PUBLISHERS,
13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.

1870.

The right of Translation is reserved.

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LONDON :

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BLENHEIM STREET, OXFORD STREET.

Ascension Day,

1857.



"Only the memory of the just
Smells sweet, and blossoms in the dust."

H A G A R.

CHAPTER I.

“**H**USHT, husht, then, you little ne’er-do-weel. We shall none win to Morris-thorpe Grange a ha’porth sooner for all your whining and crying. Marry, but if I’d have only known what a little vixen of a bairn I were taking to, someone else should have had the carrying of you across to the old country ; for it’s precious little anyone can do to keep a smile upon your face, let them try as they will.”

And Lois Fletcher shifted the baby, a puny, pale-faced creature of ten months old, to her other arm. Shifted it, perhaps, not quite so tenderly as its own mother would have done ;

for Lois was not gifted with great skill in the management of children, and never professed anything but tolerance for their noisy weakness; although she could put up with it as well as most people, having a fair share of good-temper, and a fine tact for making the best of a bad bargain.

Also there must have been a certain amount of honesty and kindness in her disposition, or that baby's mother would never have committed the little nursling to her care. Nor would Lois Fletcher herself, as she stood by the poor lady's death-bed thousands and thousands of miles across the sea, have promised to take ship with the child, tend it during the voyage with such skill as was in her power to put forth, and then give it safely in charge of the housekeeper at Morrishorpe Grange, to be by her clothed, fed, nurtured, and in some sort prepared for a life whose dawning hitherto had been all too dark and cloudy.

But the worst part of Lois Fletcher's work was over now. Two days ago the ship, *Fearless*, had anchored in London Docks, and poor little Opal's protector, after spending the night at an inn, that, as she expressed it, she might begin to feel her feet firm under her again, had come by rail to Cardington, a stirring, bustling, manufacturing town, about a hundred and fifty miles from London; and thence she was journeying afoot—there being no other means of conveyance, after the last south train reached the place—to Morrishorpe Grange, a distance of at least three miles by the turnpike road. Journeying alone, except for the very undesirable companionship of a fretful baby—not her own either—hungry, tired, out of temper, along a strange, desolate road, whose gloomy unpicturesqueness the October moon was in vain endeavouring to relieve by a few faint beams of ineffectual light.

Certainly, although she had the hardest

part of her work to look back upon, Lois Fletcher's circumstances were not favourable to amiability; and she might be excused for shifting her burden from arm to arm with a slight touch of impatience, rising into positive irritability, when a cloud, which had been hanging over them all the way from Cardington, began to descend in a steady rain; not violent, but quite enough, if it lasted, to wet them through long before Morristhorpe Grange could be reached.

"Who'd be bothered with other folk's bairns, I wonder?" said Lois, as she tucked the baby roughly up in a corner of her shawl, provoking, thereby, a fresh succession of imperious protestations from little Miss Opal, who was evidently of an independent turn of mind. "Thank goodness, I never had none of my own, for they're just nothing but a worry, do as you can, and try as you may. Husht, husht, then! I tell you it's a full mile yet, that Morris-

thorpe Grange lies, and never a bite nor a sup will you get for all your screaming while we're safe landed at it. Ay, and it's right glad I'll be to lay you into her arms that has to do with you, when I'm fairly out of your mother's trust, poor lady."

And here Lois's voice changed into something like good-natured pity.

"Poor lady! and her lying with herself among all them strange folk, with never a bit of a stone at her head to tell what a bonnie young creature she was before she dwined away and got shut of her life. Eh, bairn, but there's a deal of misery in the world; and it's lucky you'll be if you don't get a Benjamin's mess of it; for as long as things look as they are now. Stay a bit, master; may I make bold to ask you how far it is afore we'll come to Morristhorpe Grange."

These last words were spoken to a decent-looking man, apparently a farm labourer, who

had been following them for some distance, and now quickened his pace to be sooner under shelter from the rain. A hale, ruddy-complexioned old man, with fleshy cheeks falling in liberal folds over his red neck-cloth, and two or three tolerably clean-shaven chins supporting a face which had its own story to tell of honesty and good-will. Altogether Joe Bletchley—for that was the man's name—appeared the right person to speak to on a lonely road, in the gloom of October twilight.

“Morrithorpe Grange, Missis,” and Joe turned a pair of twinkling blue eyes somewhat curiously upon the buxom stranger. “Why, it’s a pretty fairish step, a good bit over a mile by the turnpike, for you’ve the most of Squire Lester’s farm to go past, and that’s none so little for them as has it to walk, being as I reckon the biggest in these parts and well done to and all, for I’ve had the oversight on it myself this twenty year past, the Squire, you

see, being a man as is getting into years; not but what we've all on us got that to do, as the parson's so often at us about. But there's a deal gainer road across t' fields, nobbut you could find it. It's a queerish road to get, but when folks has a bairn to carry they mostly looks out for a short cut. You see they're a awkward thing is a bairn, particlar when it's a parlous night like this here. Law! Missis, but we've had a sight o' wet this back end, we have. They telled me over at Cardington bread's riz again, and not for t' last time neither. And as for a bite o' butcher's meat, why there hasn't been no getting of it this good while past for them as only addles day-labourer wage. But as I was agoing to tell you—law! Missis, now what was it I was agoing to tell you? I've clean forgot."

And Joe mopped his honest old face with an end of the red neck-cloth which hung out conveniently for that purpose. He was not

built with a view to rapid locomotion, and Lois Fletcher's active quick march, joined to the warm mugginess of that late autumn evening, and the exertion of raising his voice to overpower the baby's screams, had put him a little out of his way.

"I don't know what you were going to tell me," answered Lois, amused in spite of herself by the old man's garrulity, "but I asked you how far you called it to Morriethorpe Grange."

"So you did, Missis, now I come to recollect; and how I got from that there to the bread and butcher-meat is more nor what I can tell; but my old woman always did say, I were as bad as a driven pig for going out of the main road afore I could give an answer to them as axed me ought. Yes, it's a matter of a mile or thereabouts by the turnpike; but you'd be there in ten minutes, nobbut you could find your way across the fields past Squire Lester's bit o' meadow land. I don't know as I would mind

putting you in the right road myself and giving you a hand with the bairn, but I dare-say my missis has been expecting of me home this good bit past, and she kind o' worrits if I aint to my time. She's very good to me is my old woman, and she's bore a deal, she has, with me, for I was a bad un to her when we first come together.

"It was the drink, you see, as did it," continued Joe. "Law! Missis, but that drink has a deal to answer for, and I used to leather her when I comed home of a night with a bit more nor I could carry comfortable. That was the only thing the Squire had again me, and I've worked for him and his father afore him this forty year and more; Joe, says he, it's the drink as does it, you'd be a man in a thousand if you could let the drink alone; because you see, Missis, I was always to depend on for the work. He hadn't a man on his farm, adn't the Squire, as could do a better day's

work nor what I could, and I don't know as the drink ever put me off my mowing and reaping nor nought o' that sort, as I took my wage reg'lar for doing of it. It was my old woman as got the worst of it, when I comed home at night, for the public lay handy betwixt the Squire's bit o' land and our cottage down past the church; and it stands to reason when there's everything warm and comfortable as a man should feel a bit drawn to go and sit hisself down, nobbut he didn't sit over long, which was what I used to do; and then, you see, it was bad for the old woman at home. But I took a turn a good bit since, along of a gentleman as come from Cardington to lecter, and I've never gone the wrong side of the drink this fifteen year past, let alone a drop extra at harvest times and such like; and now the Squire hasn't a man on his land as he can look to more nor what he can to myself; and instead of be-

having bad to my wife, I love her as well as any other woman, so as you may say it's all right between us now, if it wasn't for her being a bit odd in her temper. But then, you know, that's the way with them all, to have a bit of temper. I never seed a woman yet as hadn't a crook that way."

Lois Fletcher's own temper was slightly roused by this allusion to the failings of her sex, and she interrupted Joe rather curtly.

"It isn't the women's ways I want to know about, master; but if you'd tell me the gainest way to Morrithorpe Grange, I'd be obliged, for it's falling late, and I've back to go early in the morning."

"No offence, Missis. I was always a man as laid myself out to give no offence; and if you go straight forrads while you come to a white gate nigh hand a willow tree on your left hand, this side of Mr. Lester's spare slip o' meadow land, you'll maybe happen on some-

body as'll tell you t' rest o' t' road. You'll be sure to know the bit o' land, for there isn't a better in all Morristhorpe parish, and he isn't a man, isn't the Squire, to overdrive hisself with crops, while the land hasn't time for a bit o' rest from year end to year end. I always takes a pride in the Squire's land, working for him as I've done, him and his father before him, this more'n five-and-forty year—for I were took on to weed turnips afore my mother put me to school, and I've never left the land since, and never mean to, for when folks gets a good berth, it's their best look out to stick to it. There's no good done when a man's always on the move for a bit of extra wage, as I says to my son Ben when he gets agate of bettering hisself. 'Ben,' says I——"

"I reckon we can't be far off Squire Lester's gate if it's anywhere about here," said

Lois, who began now for the first time in her life to understand how extremely circumambulatory the habits of driven pigs must be, if they at all resembled those of her companion. "I think I'd better step on a bit and wish you good night."

"Well, yes, Missis, I was a-thinking the same, as your ways and mine lies contrary; this here bridle-road is gainest for me, not liking to keep my old woman waiting no longer nor what I can help, being a bit of worrit, though I don't mean no offence by it, when she gets put past her time; because, you see, some folks is particular, and then if there happens to be a bit of temper aback of it——"

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A gentleman on horseback passed them at that moment. Lois Fletcher, despairing of any further guidance from her loquacious companion, went into the middle of the road and took hold of the horse's bridle.

Lois accepted it as though some actual superiority of position, to which the ignorant always bow, and not ingrained superiority of character asserting itself through the mere accidents of poverty and circumstance, had adjusted the attitude in which they must stand to each other. The noisy assurance with which Lois Fletcher asserted her claims amongst people of her own class, lapsed into respectful acquiescence in the presence of this quiet, staid woman, who, nevertheless, could only influence her by the power of a noble nature over a more selfish one.

She answered meekly—

“Yes. The missis gave me all I was to have before I started, and I’ve no claims upon nobody now. All I’ve got to do is to go back same as I came, as I don’t think I can do better, the wage as the other lady offered me being a paying thing, and me having no call to stop on this side.”

"No. I don't doubt you'll do better for yourself in Melbourne than here. It's a fine place, is Melbourne, for getting on. My brother Amos often says that he'll set off and go some day, for he isn't quite content with what he's doing for himself in England; but I say it'll be time to believe it when he starts. I can't say that I should much care for him to go, either, just now."

"No; not if he lives with you to keep you company here. It's an awful lonesome place, is this. Don't the master and mistress live at it reglar?"

Hagar Winter looked keenly into Lois's face; but Lois, busy cutting herself a second slice of bacon, did not notice the sharp, almost angry glance.

"No, they went away awhile back, and I'm taking care of the house for them. It's very quiet, but I don't mind that."

"I daresay not. Some people like being

quiet. I can't say I ever did. I was always fond of a bit o' company, though I'm a woman can hold my tongue as well as anybody when there's a need to. I daresay, then, the master and missis has most likely got a house in London. Rich folks generally has, and I don't suppose any but rich folks would live in a place like this here, being such a size as it is. But if they don't matter it no more than what I do, it'll be a fairish time afore they come back to it. I hate a place as looks as if nobody belonged to it."

Hagar Winter made no reply. She only bent over the sleeping baby's face with somewhat of a pitying look upon her own.

It was a wan, wistful little face, with few of babyhood's rounded outlines, and none of babyhood's rosy plumpness. There were dark shadows under the eyes. The tiny mouth, close folded now, had an expression of painful endurance about it, as well as of temper and

resolution. Already Lois Fletcher's little nursing seemed to have had some experience, figuratively as well as literally, of the "waves of this troublesome world," upon which, not a year ago, an all-disposing Providence had launched it, whether for good or ill remained yet to be proved.

"It reminds me just a little of its mother," said Hagar Winter thoughtfully, rather sadly, too.

"Maybe it does," replied Lois. "I said from the first it favoured her more than the master, though he was as well-put-together a gentleman as you would meet in a summer-day's journey. It has her eyes, wonderful for size, if only you could see them right wide open, and not swelled up with crying, as I will say it cries more than any baby ever I had to do with in my born days; and her wee dainty brows, too, scarce thicker than a line, but so straight and glossy. Some of the ladies that

came with us in the ship, and had children of their own, bonnie, lightsome, golden-haired bairns, huffed at her, and said she was none a beauty; and maybe they were right, for I never did go to say she were as comely as some I've seen. But I used to tell them that when she won to be a young maiden, those dainty brows of hers, and that wee mouth, and them wonderful great eyes, would gar the men call her right handsome. Men always goes to good looks, and I suppose that's the reason they never came my way."

And Lois Fletcher set her head coquettishly on one side, looking towards Hagar Winter, as though expecting that she would oppose the logic of that last remark. But Hagar did not oppose it. She was a woman who never gave compliments, even when they were deserved. One had but to look into her face, so grave, so still, so rigid, to be sure that flattery was not in her line. So Lois went on.

“Men are queer things. I’m thankful to say I never had nothing to do with them. I always thought I were better keep myself to myself than trusten their fair speeches. The most of them that ever I set eyes on—and I’ve set eyes on a good many, for out there where I come from they’re as plentiful as the women-folk is here—were no good. You never know where you have them, and, maybe, if you did, you’d be no better of the knowing. That’s just my opinion of the men, and I never chanced on one yet garred me better it.”

After that there was a long silence whilst Lois finished her tea. The grave, rigid look tightened on Hagar Winter’s face, but she spoke no word. For many years ago, in her youth-time, she had loved one of the men, Mark Renneson by name, loved him with all the steadfastness and truth of a heart that could neither change nor forget. And after they were betrothed, he went away to a foreign

country, carrying with him her promise, so faithful—leaving with her his, so false. For when three years had passed, years in which she had thought of him, prayed for him, waited for him, as only such women can think, and pray, and wait, he came back, not alone, but bringing with him a bonnie wife—bonnier far than Hagar Winter, whom he had wooed and wed beyond the seas.

Hagar never chided him. She never gave him a harsh word, or let others speak a harsh word of him to her. She had loved him once; she could not hate him now. But as she could not change nor forget, so neither could she forgive. She grew cold after that, and hard and stern. Her face, once so fair in its womanly trustfulness, darkened, as the sky does when the evening sun has gone. She did not die, as many a weaker, happier maiden has died, when to die is better than to live; but she passed for a little while into the living death of madness,

and then came home to toil and labour on in her humble station ; to rise above it at last, through the kindness of a lady, Opal's mother, who took her into her house, and whom she served very faithfully, not for love—that had all been crushed out of her by Mark Renneson's faithlessness—but for gratitude, which is often more trusty than love. Served her so faithfully, that six months ago, on a dying bed, in a land of strangers, that lady bequeathed her child to Hagar Winter's care, knowing that the hard, stern, but devoted woman would fulfil the trust committed to her, as she fulfilled every other trust, with not much noise of words, not much show of affection or caresses, but with strong, quiet, steady faith, which, once giving, gave unto the end.

Perhaps God would deal more lovingly with Hagar Winter than she had dealt with Mark Renneson. Perhaps he would forgive her that, having been deceived by one made in His

own image, she had never trusted man again. Perhaps He would forgive her that, as the years passed on, leaving her lonely and uncared for, they left her also hard and cold. And looking, not at the narrowness of the service which she gave to Him, all unperfumed by love's sweet incense, but at the terrible fight of toil and anguish—the strife more bitter than death, and more cruel, through which she had passed, to give anything at all, He would say at last, even of that much-enduring, much-suffering woman—"She hath done what she could."

CHAPTER III.

THERE was not much more attempt at conversation between the two women. Lois Fletcher, wearied by her long journey, comforted by the good tea to which she had done ample justice, fell asleep in her arm-chair by the chimney-corner, and soon a series of mighty snores bore witness to the fact that her day's labours were at an end.

Hagar still nursed the baby, rocked it quietly to and fro, changing its position from time to time if it moved restlessly, chafing its little hands and feet, which were still chilled by long exposure to the wind and wet of that October night. But as she performed these

kindly offices her eyes never glistened with a tear of tenderness, and her lips never unbent into a smile of motherlike pity; and never one caressing word did she murmur to the child, as it nestled to her in the touching helplessness of infancy. All that faithful devotion to its mother's memory might win, she would do for it, but no light of lovingkindness could shine now from Hagar Winter on the poor little orphan's life.

So they sat there, by the only spot of warmth and brightness which was left in that desolate old Grange. What a contrast between those two faces, of the watching and the sleeping woman! Lois Fletcher's ruddy, stolid, complacent, upon which intense feeling, whether of joy or grief, never had left its mark, never could leave it. Hagar Winter's sharp and worn, not so much with the slow touch of years, as with that other, sadder touch of long-past, unforgiven wrong; yet bearing amidst all its

gloom a faint, far-off glow of tenderness, the almost forgotten light of the old time, when she loved, and trusted, and was happy. A light that, which, once having shone in any human face, can quite die out of it no more again for ever.

By-and-by a heavy footstep was heard in the paved courtyard, followed by the shrill yelping of two or three little curs, which roused the mastiff, and provoked him to a surly growl. The voice woke Lois. She started up with a loud scream.

"Mercy on us! Is it fire, or are we shipping water, or are there rocks ahead, or what is it? Mistress Winter, *do* speak—you look like a ghost!"

And so she did, for Lois Fletcher's scream had startled her. She turned very pale. Her hands shook nervously. There came a restless, scared look into her face.

"It's nothing to be afraid of," she said, after

recovering her composure. "It's only my step-brother, Amos Durben, come in. He generally gets back from the 'coy about this time of night; and when the dogs all get together, they make noise enough sometimes to raise the house."

"Ah! I'm glad it's nothing no worse than that. There used to be such awful noises on board the ship, and I haven't got over them yet. I declare I never lay me down to sleep but what I thought we might all be gone to the bottom before morning. What with the shouting and the screaming, and the water that used to come right over the sides, if there happened to be a bit heavier sea than usual; and it's got me that nervous, while I scarce know where I am if I happen to be waked sudden. And then you looked so awful scared yourself, while I was sure something must be up out of the common."

"You startled me with screaming. That

was it. I was a bit wrong in my head once, and ever since then it's gone badly with me if I get a sudden start. I don't know what it's left behind, but I expect it will be the ending of me some day. The doctor told me I was to be careful and keep myself quiet. They mostly tell people to be careful and keep themselves quiet, when they don't exactly know what else to say. Not that it was ever much in my way to be anything but quiet, though, so he needn't have troubled himself to tell me that."

"What did you say they called him?"

"Who?—the doctor?"

"No, the other. Him as just come in."

"Oh! you mean my brother. Amos Durben they call him. You see he's not my own brother. My mother was a widow, and I was her only child before she married Ralph Durben, and then Amos came after. He's a good deal younger than I am, is Amos."

Lois began to sort her cloaks and wrappings, and tried to give a few beautifying touches to her outer woman, which in its present state of limp untidiness, was anything but prepossessing.

"Well, if he's coming in," she said, "I think I'll go. There's no one can make themselves look more viewly nor what I can, when things is agreeable for it; but when you're just from a journey, it kind of puts you off your appearance, and when I do have to come the way of the men, I'd as soon look decent as not."

"Just as you like," replied Hagar, who did not seem particularly wishful to retain her visitor. "I'll go upstairs to show you the room, but you need not hurry. Amos won't be in yet for a good half hour. He has his birds to see to and put by; and I daresay there'll be a good take of them to-night, for the wind lies well; and it makes all the

difference which way the wind lies for the 'coy."

"For the what?" asked Lois, looking puzzled.

"The 'coy. There's a decoy for wild-fowl just at the back of Morrithorpe Grange; and many and many's the dozen they take when the season happens to be good. You see, there's an opening out to the coast from Morrithorpe mere, close by the marshes here; and that makes it such a good spot for happening of the birds. You may see hundreds of them sometimes, scudding and flapping about when the wind lies fair. They're fond of the marsh and sedge about Morrithorpe Grange, when the cold weather comes on; but we don't get many of them in the summer time. The decoy belongs to Mr. Lester, the same gentleman who owns the meadowland on the other side of the moat; and he pays my brother Amos to keep it."

"And I daresay it's good pay too," suggested Lois, who seemed to be developing a feminine interest in Amos Durben and his worldly circumstances.

"Yes, tolerably good for this part of the country, and as times go. You see, in an out-of-the-way place like this, a man can't get the wages that he might get in a great town. The Squire gives him so much a score for all he snares; and then he has what he can make for himself at odd times. Which comes to something considerable, because at hay and harvest times, when there's scarcely ever anything to be caught at the 'coy, he helps the little farmers about here to settle up their books, and that sort of thing. He's a good scholar, is Amos, for my mother always thought a deal about giving us our learning; and he often talks of doing better for himself than what he is doing now; but I don't know if it will come to anything.

He's a thrifty man, too, is Amos. I've known him make a great deal extra to put into the bank when the 'coy was slack; and I tell him he could make a good deal more if he had a wife to help him with it. She could tend it just as well as he could, and then he'd have his time clear for something else.

"Because, you see," added Hagar Winter, gravely, simply as ever, "it's a thing that a woman may do a good deal of, is decoying. It's nice light work if you take it in a good time of day, when the wind is fair, and there is plenty of sunshine to keep you warm. Amos has often been at me, being as I am light and silent of foot, to help him when there was likely to be a good take; but it's a thing I never gave any heed to myself. I can't do with work that makes me have to crouch and stoop to it; and you know you have to be stooping all the time behind the reed screens and things when you're decoying. It's

a thing you can scarce stand upright to, a bit, and that don't suit me."

"Don't it?" said Lois. "Rheumatics, I dare say. They're a awkward thing is rheumatics for stooping."

"It isn't rheumatics," answered Hagar Winter. "I can go through as much now as ever I could in my life; but just I like to do something that I can stand upright while I'm doing it. It's good for people to stand upright. If I was a man I'd never take a trade that I had to stoop to, like decoying."

"Well, I don't know for that, Mistress Winter. I wouldn't mind stooping a bit, if it helped me to a living; but as you say, I don't doubt it's a thing a woman may do a good deal of, and a wife would be a profitable thing into your brother's pocket, if he could light on one suitable for the work. But I think I'll be going now, and then I

shall be fresh to start in the morning. I've got to catch the train at nine o'clock, and it's a pretty fairish step from here; but happen I shall get someone to set me a bit of way."

"Oh! yes," said Hagar, who did not perceive that Lois was aiming in the direction of Amos Durben. "I'll go with you myself, and perhaps we may get a lift part of the way, it being market-day, and many carts passing, as they always do, between here and Cardington. I will keep the baby to-night. I may as well take to it from the first; and you'll be the better of a good night's rest after your journey."

Hagar lighted a candle and conducted Lois up the back staircase and along several passages to the room which she was to occupy, at the farther end of the house.

"You're a good nurse," Lois remarked, as she watched how carefully Hagar Win-

ter covered the baby up before exposing it to the cold air which blew down the passages. "One might think you'd had a deal of that sort of work to do in your time. You won't let the little one want for nothing, I daresay. It's good to tell when folks has had to do with children."

"Yes," said Hagar, coldly and quietly, "I've had to do with one or two children in my time. When the master and mistress are away, and I am left here by myself, I sometimes take a child to nurse. It puts on the time, and I can do with them better than what some people might think I could."

"I don't doubt it, Mistress Winter. I suppose they'll be rich folks that lives here, and pays you pretty well for taking care of the house. Owns the property round about, maybe."

Again that keen, questioning glance from Hagar's dark eyes, which Lois, only noting

how damp and mildew had stained the walls of those long gloomy galleries, never observed. Hagar answered evasively, for even better than her visitor she knew when to speak and when to be silent.

"Pretty well. I can't say that I have anything to complain of, and being a quiet person, and best content with my own company, the loneliness doesn't fret me as it would a many. I couldn't get on in a place where there was a deal of talking.

"You'll find all you want," she continued, glancing round the room into which they had just entered. "It isn't exactly to call comfortable, because there are none of the rooms occupied but the two little ones that were kept open for Amos and me. The master and mistress were particular to have the furniture put to one side when they went away, so that I can't arrange things as nice as they might be."

Hagar Winter was quite right. No one would have thought of calling the room comfortable in which Lois was bidden to rest herself after that long, cold, weary journey. The dip candle which she had set on a tarnished gilt bracket between the curtainless windows, did little else, though its light was reflected from a large mirror, than turn the previous darkness into a gloom scarcely more cheerful than that darkness. The room was large and lofty, wainscoted with black oak, which mocked the feeble attempt of the candlelight even to suggest the richness of some of its panels and mouldings. There were cabinets, too, of carved oak, and old-fashioned nests of drawers and bureaux which, had anyone cared for their exceeding beauty, might have graced a nobleman's dwelling. But they were damp-stained and mildewed, some of them rotted and worm-eaten ; and a more brilliant light than that which Hagar Winter

had brought into the room would only have revealed more pitifully the dust which, through years of neglect and disuse, had gathered upon their once so dainty carving of fruit and flower and foliage.

Upon every lock a piece of parchment was fixed, sealed with a red seal bearing a coat of arms and the initials of the owner. The bureaux were sealed too, and so were the old-fashioned cabinets which stood, half lost among their own shadows, in the corners of the room. The carpets were rolled up and put out of the way. The lofty four-post bed, with its heavy draperies and nodding plumes, was enveloped in a holland covering, and for Lois Fletcher's use a little iron pallet with dimity furniture had been placed at its foot. The whole place looked blank and cheerless—worse than cheerless, haunted by the spectre of a life that had long ago deserted it.

"I daresay you'll be too tired, though, to find fault, and you don't need to be afraid," said Hagar, as Lois Fletcher peered half curiously, half fearfully into the dim recesses of the room. "It's safe enough. I've had to bring you a long way round to it, for in old houses like this the passages run queer, but that end where the big cabinet is joins on to my room, and if anything frightens you, you've nothing to do but knock, and I shall hear you in a moment, for I'm a light sleeper; and having the baby will make me more wakeful, just at first. But we're never molested here. You see the house outside don't look as if there were anything in it worth making away with. One might think, to look at it, it hadn't been lived in for fifty years, a damp situation like this makes such a difference. Amos is up half the night sometimes, and at all hours of the morning, about the decoy, so that the house, as one may say, is never left to itself. I've

been here a long time now, and I never heard a footstep about the place that ought not to have been. Or else it does look rather lonesome."

"Ay, that it do," said Lois, emphatically. "I never saw a place that looked lonelier, and more as if everything wasn't right about it. I lay the master and missis has gone away for a good bit, or they wouldn't have everything laid up so, and the damp struck through the walls so as it'll be more than you can do to make it look decent against they come back. I wonder they didn't order fires while they was away. Gone to France maybe, or somewheres abroad, I reckon."

"I don't know where the master was going. He was not a gentleman that ever gave me or the rest of the servants account of his matters, and I never ask for what's not told me. What I've got to do is to stay by the place till they come back, and I do it. And now I'll wish you good night."

“ Good night, and thank you kindly. And when you’re stirring in the morning you might give me a call, though I don’t feel as if I should sleep over long amongst these queer things. It would be awk’ard if I missed that train, it might loss me the situation, and the wage isn’t what I could meet with again easy.”

“ You shan’t miss it. I will see that you leave here in time.”

And with that, Hagar Winter came downstairs to the kitchen.

CHAPTER IV.

AMOS DURBEN was sitting there when she returned, filling his pipe from a dirty leather pouch which he carried in his pocket.

Hagar Winter's step-brother was a low, narrow-built, insignificant looking man, with a cat-like stealthiness about his movements, and a crouching gait, acquired by many years' stooping behind the reed screens of the decoy. It was his business to be wary, to keep himself out of sight, to tread cautiously, with noiseless footsteps, and be constantly on the look out for a favourable opportunity of securing his game. And this sort of thing had worked itself, as the daily custom of a man's life often

does, into his very gesture and behaviour. He had a way of shrugging his shoulder, and glancing furtively to one side, of speaking under his breath, of moving his hand cautiously forward as though to restrain the too eager spring of the dogs, who were listening for his signal to rush upon their prey. He never looked anyone straight in the face; he never walked boldly up to anyone. He always seemed to be keeping something in the background, to be holding something out of the way for a little while, just as he used to hold Cuff and Tiger back until the fowl were safely in the pipes, and only wanted driving to their strangling amongst the nets.

One might have thought that the habit of decoying had wrought itself into his very nature; that, as Hagar Winter had said, he had learned to stoop with his trade, that stealthiness had become an instinct and crouching a habit. Or it might be that he needed

not any such teaching from without—that it was the real nature of the man, working from within, and stamping itself upon the exterior life, instead of a mere trick of circumstance growing by degrees into a habit. For the true life which a man lives within himself, more often moulds the accidents of the outer life than is moulded by them; and if his soul stands upright, the face through which it shows itself will be honestly uplifted too.

Amos Durben scarcely looked up from his pipe as Hagar entered the room, until he heard the baby stirring in her arms.

“Eh! Hagar, what’n ye got there? Another nurse child, I lay a penny!”

Hagar had never told her step-brother of the letter which Opal’s mother had sent, nor of the promise which she had made to herself to take the child, and care for it so long as it should need care of hers. This brother and sister had little knowledge of each other’s life,

little communication with each other, beyond that of eating at the same table, and having shelter beneath one roof. He did his work, and she did hers, each asking the other few questions.

Her life was ruled by duty, his by interest ; and therefore, though they of necessity touched sometimes, they never blended. There was no need now for her to tell him anything else than what he already appeared to take for granted, namely, that this child had been sent to her to be fed, clothed, reared for pay, just as one or two other children had been fed, clothed and reared by her ; and then at such time as its parents chose to claim it, given back to them.

So, as she took her seat again by the fire with the baby on her knee, she only replied—

“Yes, it’s a child I’ve taken to nurse. I’ve thought a good many times, since Miss Ar-

mitage had little Eulie Guildenstern fetched home again, that I would take a child and look after it. It's a lonesome place is this, to live by oneself in, and a child seems to help the time on."

"Well, please yourself," and Amos Durben put the dirty pouch back again into his pocket. "I reckon if you get tired on it you can any time send it back to where it come from. I don't see if you wanted to have earned a bit of money extra, you mightn't have done it with helping me at the 'coy. There's many and many a hour you might be sitting there, instead of me, while I was agate with something that would better the pay. And easier, too, than tewing with a child that doesn't belong to you. There's always plenty of lone women ready to take a child that comes where it hasn't a right to."

And Amos Durben sneered as he stooped to light his pipe at the kitchen fire. He had

not much opinion of anyone but himself in a general way. But Hagar Winter's eyes flashed as they caught the leering look in his, and her voice had a clear ring of command in it which made him cower as she said,

"Amos, you say nothing more of that sort, or you and I don't stay together in this house. You've got upon a wrong track altogether. This child may have come where she wasn't wanted, perhaps—a many does that—but she hasn't come where she had no right to. She belongs to an honest mother, and for all the rest you've nothing more to do with it."

"No more I have. It's your own look out. I reckon you'll be well paid. Folks don't generally mind a bit of money to have their children well done to; and they always know they'll be well done to, when such as you gets the tending of them."

Amos put this last remark in to smooth his

sister down. He knew how to take care of his own comfort as well as most people, and much of that comfort depended upon his keeping straight with Hagar, who had been the means of procuring him the situation with Mr. Lester, and through whose interest it was that hitherto he had been allowed a home, rent free, in the old Grange. And Hagar, though very quiet and undemonstrative, was awkward to manage when once she got put out of the way,"

"Yes," she said, "I've looked after that. I *shall* be well paid."

And she said no more. She never told her brother that all she was doing for the child was done for gratitude, not for reward ; that Opal's mother, dying amongst strangers in a foreign land, unwept, unwatched over, uncared for, had no reward to give, save the last sigh of a poor broken heart, which could breathe out that last sigh in peace, knowing that the babe

was left to one who would care for it, even unto death.

This was Hagar Winter's reward—the consciousness that she was doing her duty to the child of one who, in her own time of desertion and desolation, had been good to her, had given her a home and a shelter, and had spoken kindly to her.

This would not have been enough for many women. It was enough for Hagar Winter. Nor did the thought so much as cross her mind that in giving as she gave, she went beyond what duty bade her to do. She was one of those women who, if she had loved happily, would have gone to danger and to death, would have braved all loss, and counted it gain for him she loved. She could not do that now. All that she had to give of human love had been given to Mark Renneson—given and lost. But the instinct of self-sacrifice and devotion which was the ruling power of her life, was too strong

within her to be stifled ; and she poured it out now upon Opal, not for the helpless babe's own sake, but because it belonged to the only friend who had ever been kind and true and faithful to her.

Nothing more was said about the child after that. Amos never asked who brought it, nor did Hagar Winter tell him. He smoked his pipe, and then fed his dogs and went to bed. Next morning Lois Fletcher made her appearance, armed for conquest, her ringlets smoothed, her ribbons arranged, her buxom face dressed in smiles which would have utterly undone a less hard and unimpressible heart than that she sought to move. But, to her discomfiture, Amos Durben had gone away before daybreak. The clouds had cleared off, a fair wind sprang up about four o'clock in the morning, and whilst she was still dreaming of a little pleasant flirtation, and perhaps another added to the list of hearts she had already conquered—for Lois

was a very taking young woman when she chose to put forth her fascinations—and preening her plumes before the mirror in that desolate old chamber, Amos was off and away with his dogs to the decoy, crouching behind the reed screens, peering cautiously through their openings to watch into which pipe the wildfowl swam, and then giving that long low whistle at which the decoy ducks should come slowly sailing up, drawing the others after them to a cruel death among the nets.

No chance for Lois this time. So she had to accept Hagar Winter's escort, and, not in the best of tempers, set off once more across Squire Lester's bit of meadow land, and down the turnpike road to Cardington, taking comfort, as she had often done before, from the reflection that there was as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it.

Before evening she was in London again, comfortably settled down in her new situation

as maid to the young ladies with whom in the course of a few weeks she was to set sail for Melbourne. If Amos Durben did happen to go there, as he sometimes talked to Hagar of going and trying his fortunes in a new line of life, he had better have a care. For Lois was a shrewd, far-seeing, capable woman, with much power of making her own way in the world; and if he happened to cross her path, he might find her one too many for him. So that in the end, instead of decoying wild-fowl, he might in his turn be decoyed by a tame one.

CHAPTER V.

MORRISTHORPE was a quiet, well-conducted village, that lived its little life, and buried its old people, and married its youths and maidens, and went through its unchronicled romance of daily joy and sorrow, and reaped and gathered in its harvest with due thanksgiving sermon and decoration of village church, and observed all other prescribed usages of rustic life within a somewhat straggling parish boundary, whose southern limit was defined by an old moss-covered, crumbling wayside stone, situated exactly two miles from Cardington, a flourishing manufacturing town in the eastern counties.

It lay just on the margin of the fen district. Great stretches of meadow and corn land, the fattest, most fertile in all the country round, had been reclaimed within the memory of living men from the sea, which even now seemed ever on the watch to seize upon its lawful rights, and was only kept within forced limits by dykes, embankments, and other devices of engineering skill. In wet seasons Morristhorpe Wash, two miles away, rose and flooded the meadows on the eastern side of the parish, almost up to the garden of the old Grange; leaving behind a residuum of slush and mud, which, however, more than compensated for any inconvenience it might occasion, by the increased fertility of the crops next season. So that the farmers who had land on that side of the village never complained, for they said if their fields were flooded five years out of the ten, the remaining five yielded three times

as much as any other land in the parish. And you might go over the whole fen district, nay, you might travel over most of the agricultural counties of England, and find never another parish whose meadows in spring time glowed with such a living green, and in summer gave such generous yield to the merry haymakers, and in autumn brought such golden store of wealth to their owners' barns, as did those of the parish of Morris-thorpe, two miles from the flourishing manufacturing town of Cardington.

Its population did not number more than two or three hundred, but class was divided from class by those clear, definite lines of demarcation which nowhere make themselves felt more strongly than in small villages situated at a moderate distance from important manufacturing towns. There was the very great man of the place, the apex, as it were, of the social pyramid, a burly old Ad-

miral, the county member, who lived at the Hall, and kept hunters, and bred prize cattle, and took the chair at Cardington meetings, and waxed eloquent at agricultural dinners, and ruled the politics of the neighbourhood, and sometimes patted awe-stricken little girls on the head as he met them coming home from school, and said his prayers once every Sunday at the parish church out of a velvet-bound, gold-embossed prayer-book, quite as imposing in its appearance as himself, and in various other ways kept up the dignity of the place. And next to him came two or three minor landed gentry, whose wives and daughters went up to London for the season, so establishing themselves as decidedly upper-class people; and then came a few retired merchants from Cardington, and about half-a-dozen well-to-do farmers, of whom the richest was Mr., or as he was generally called, Squire Lester, who owned the land next to Morristhorpe

Grange, and might, if he had not been too retiring to assume the position which his wealth gave him, have been almost equal to the landed gentry themselves.

After these, passing over an intermediate rank of widows and maiden ladies who had settled in the place on account of its quietness and cheapness, came some small, very small, shopkeepers. That is, the shops were small, not the keepers of them; for Mr. Chumley, the Morristhorpe grocer, weighed at least fifteen stone, and Mr. Malkin, the draper, to whose "establishment" the Admiral's lady occasionally sent for a pennyworth of tape, or a paper of pins, was decidedly the largest man in the parish, in his own estimation.

Then, last of all in the social scale, little thought of, little cared for, slightly prized by those in whose service they wore out their toilsome lives, came the great, unwashed herd of

farm labourers, hard-handed, thick-headed, good-hearted men for the most part, who sat in the free seats down the middle aisle at church, and stumbled through the responses in a hazy uncertain fashion, quickened thereto by the consciousness of the clerical visage looming upon them above an awful cloud of sacerdotal raiment; and listened with drowsy submission to the sermon, and then shuffled home through the little door at the plebeian end of the church, feeling that somehow all would be well with them. Their one bright spot in all the year was the statute fair, their land of Goshen the neighbouring town of Cardington, where that fair was held; their idea of earthly bliss—or indeed any sort of bliss—a settlee in the Morris-thorpe public-house, with a pot of beer on a table before them, a pipe of Limerick twist between their lips, and a fiddle telling its pleasant story in the smoky back-ground of the bar.

Now and then on Sunday afternoons, a stray

exhorter from the ranks of the Cardington Primitive Methodists gathered them together on the village green, and, with the eloquence of unlearned but large-hearted charity, tried to explain to them somewhat of the glory and the brightness which lay outside of their darkened lives, or to aim some word of truth whose barbed shaft might pierce their slumbering consciences. And listening to him, a dim light stole sometimes into the stolid eyes, and stubborn faces took a touch of tenderness, and rough hands were lifted up to wipe away a tear. And when the last prayer was said, the Morris-thorpe labourers turned away, feeling, as they never did feel under the more cultivated parish ministrations, that somehow all would *not* be well, that a brighter happiness might be reached than even Limerick twist or Cardington four-penny could afford: or—the brightness not being reached—a darker darkness waited for them, when these things could no longer give their

wonted comfort. But the Morristhorpe Arms opened its doors upon the village green, and Sunday afternoon not coming within the orthodox hours of divine service, nought hindered that they should enter there; and once entered, a glass of beer and a pipe soon set all straight again, and gave them back to their easy animalism.

Poor souls! If one ought not rather to call them poor bodies, there being not much soul to speak of within them. They knew no better. As their fathers did, so did they, from generation to generation. And when their stint of labour was done, when, having ploughed and sowed, and reaped, toiled and slaved and laboured, eaten, drunk, and slept, for forty, fifty, or seventy years, the world had no further need of them, their children rose up to fill their places, and they went—ah! whither did they go? For truly they had lived, most of them, after their blind, groping fashion

up to the light that was set before them; they had worked hard for their earthly task-master, they had done their labour and received their wages; and some who do no more, nay, some who do not so much—living, with larger light and nobler power to use it, a life of lazy, low content, think of their future with abundant satisfaction.

Apart from the village, separated from it by Squire Lester's rich tract of meadow land, and then by an outstretching arm of the mere, which in autumn and winter time spread itself out until it almost plashed against the grey, moss-grown garden wall, stood Morristhorpe Grange. Stood alone, bleak, desolate, unprotected; stained deeper and deeper each succeeding year with damp and mildew from the marshes around, overgrown with lichens which crept from stone to stone until they wove over all the place a many-coloured veil of picturesque decay. Frost and rain had long ago gnawed

down the dog's-tooth moulding which some old craftsman had chiselled round the great entrance. The cornices were dropping away piecemeal. The garden paths were choked with weeds. The brown leaves fell and rotted autumn by autumn, leaving a richer soil for the tall rank grass which flourished so bravely upon it. The apricot and peach trees, unpruned, untended, clambered over the wall, or falling, dragged it inch by inch with them. The roses had worn themselves out, and flowered no longer upon the rusty arches which formerly they covered with such fragrant wealth of blossom. Great beds of arbutus and rhododendron, once the pride and glory of the place, had pined away, choked and fouled by the rotting leaves which thickened round them year by year. Only the old elm trees which shut in the eastern side of the garden burgeoned as lustily as ever; and the yew trees which had been planted there in Queen Elizabeth's time, stretched

up black and gloomy alike in spring's young freshness and the golden beauty of autumn.

Beyond the house, on its northern side, Morristhorpe Marsh deepened into a pool, fringed with beds of osiers and reed banks, dappled over with flag leaves and water-lilies ; and here was the decoy owned by Squire Lester, the rich Morristhorpe farmer, and worked so deftly by Amos Durben.

It was rather a pretty sight to see the decoy on a sunshiny September day, when the wild ducks were gliding in and out among the reeds, or pluming themselves under the lily flowers, or tossing up the water in showers of glancing spray as they dived and shook their snowy wings, and then fluttered away to their coverts among the sedge. And, thither towards evening, or in early morning time, when all was very quiet, Amos Durben used to go with his dogs and a bag of barley, and crouch behind the osier screens

until, just at the right time, a low whistle brought the decoy ducks to one of the openings, lured there by the grain which they knew was always ready for them. Troops of the wild fowl would follow them, either from curiosity or good fellowship; and when these were fairly in the narrow osier-covered channel, Amos dropped a net over its outlet, and signalled to his dogs, who with many a yelp and growl drove the poor frightened creatures to the end of the pipe, where, as they fluttered and plunged in helpless confusion, he drew them out one by one, and wrung their necks for the Cardington market.

Sometimes, for weeks together, the wind was unfavourable, or the decoy would not work, and then Amos took to his punt, a flat, shallow boat, just long enough to hold himself lying in the bottom of it. In this he paddled down the marsh to Morristhorpe mere, a great open stretch of water, only a few miles from the sea,

dotted over with sedgy islands and clumps of brown bulrushes, in some of which he would conceal himself, and lying down in the bottom of his boat, and resting his gun upon its edge, he would wait for hours until a covey of wild fowl came gliding past. Then he used to fire a salute into their midst, seldom failing to wound many a purple-necked beauty, and stain the mere lilies with its blood. And so he would paddle about, always keeping himself out of sight behind the bulrushes, slowly loading his boat with slaughtered birds, until the evening sunlight, slanting in golden streaks among the tall reeds, or the grey mists rising from the marshes, told him it was time to go back to Hagar Winter and the deserted old Grange.

That was Amos Durben's way of getting a living. Not a way to be called heroic, nor yet tending to develop the best characteristics of a man, bravery, honour, and openness. No wonder that having followed it from his boy-

hood, and having brought to it also a nature well fitted to its requirements, it had dragged him to its own level, and made him, by habit as well as by disposition, stealthy, crouching, and reserved. But it was his trade; and as Amos always replied, when Hagar Winter used to say she would rather starve than earn her bread in that way,

“Folks must live, and there’s nothing like a ’coy for peace and quietness.”

Morrithorpe Grange had been untenanted, except by Hagar Winter and her step-brother, ever since Captain Darque, its owner, left his country in disgrace some years before. The Darques were a good old family, and had lived from generation to generation in Morrithorpe Grange for four hundred years; lived many of them to do good service to their king and their country, and then died to sleep quietly beneath that noble motto, which never deed of theirs had shamed, “*I can, if I will.*”

Those were the words which the Darques had brought to Saxon England; and well they had stood by that legend in old years of storm, and battle, and strife.

But of late bad blood had crept into the family. Evil thoughts had been conceived, evil purposes planned in that old homestead, thoughts and purposes which a true man, and an honourable, would have blushed to own. Their name was no longer a name to be worn with lofty front and ancestral pride, or to be handed down, an unsullied heritage, to sons who should wear it as worthily as their fathers had done. Many a village maiden had cause to rue the day when she gave back smile for smile to the gallant young gentleman, who, with bright face and laughing eye, rode past her father's cottage on his way home to Morristhorpe Grange. Many a noble lady had lived to hate the courteous ways and chivalrous bearing, and soft-spoken words

which had won her love, and her hand, and her gold; and having won them, repaid the gift with cruelty and desertion. And now the village people named their name with scowling brows, and angry tones, and muttered ill wishes as they passed the old house, on those who had made its mouldering walls a covert for their evil purposes and crafty deeds.

But still for all that, the Darques had been well thought of in a country which will forgive almost anything to its gentlefolk, save inability to pay their debts of honour. Neither curse of betrayed maiden, nor reproach of injured wife, had kept the Darques of Morris-thorpe Grange from being great favourites in London society, and eligible partners at county balls, and popular candidates at elections. And when there was a young Darque to be married, fortune-hunting dowagers would not hesitate to thrust their daughters into his way, and invite him to their houses, and pet,

and flatter, and feast him. For were not the Darques a good old family, and had they not houses and lands in possession, and could they not keep their mansion in town, and their box at the opera, and deck out their wives in the family diamonds, and give them, if not a happy home, at least a splendid position, which was just as good, and a great deal more substantial? Little matter a village girl or two wailing by some obscure fireside, or whispers of black looks and angry words in the silken-cushioned boudoirs of the London mansion, if the jewels and the carriages, and the livery servants, and the box at the opera, and the splendid position, could be secured. So that, however the Darques might be held at Morristhorpe—and there the village people used to say they were Darque by name and Dark by nature—they had no lack of smiles and flattery, in the more experienced and appreciative world of London society.

But the present owner of Morristhorpe Grange had done worse than his forefathers. He had great gifts, and his fall in using them dishonourably was great. Courageous and chivalrous as any knight of old, when it suited his purpose to be so, he had won for himself a fair young wife, and then spoiled her life by his unfaithfulness. Brilliant and polished in manner, crafty and designing at heart, he had first fascinated and then duped those of whom he wished to make gain. Fond of hazard and excitement, he had played deep in London gaming-houses; and then, to redeem his debts of honour, had stooped to artifice which the meanest day labourer on his estate would have scorned. At last, to rid himself of liabilities which were becoming troublesome, he had gone into cheating on a gigantic scale. He became director in company after company, which, when it had gulled a too trustful public, and filled the pockets of a few clever swindlers, collapsed,

plunging its dupes into undeserved poverty. As one of the magistrates of Cardington, he sat on the bench and dismissed poor wretches to six weeks' imprisonment, or as many years' transportation, for stealing a handful of turnips, or bagging a stray carrot to feed their famishing children ; while at the same time he was putting his own white hands into the pockets of the public, and robbing them of thousands, smiling to them all the while with the courtly aristocratic smile of the old noble Darques, and winning their trust with those fair frank ways which he had inherited from ancestors of whom he was not worthy.

Finally, Captain Darque put himself in the forefront of a great mining speculation, which was to overflow the coffers of its supporters with untold wealth, and pay back a thousand-fold every guinea embarked in it. But this last performance was not managed with the cleverness which had characterised the noble Cap-

tain's other schemes for money-getting. Hitherto he had contrived, while ruining others, to secure a safe harbour for himself before the crash came. This time, however, by some unfortunate oversight, he exposed himself to the terrors of the law; and rather than face his creditors, and stand before his country a disgraced and ruined man, he skulked out of sight, went off to South America, and lived there upon the spoils which he had filched from those at home.

His wife clung to him as women often do cling to those who have injured and neglected them; and when he fled from justice, she fled with him to a safe hiding-place abroad. The house was broken up, the servants dismissed, the furniture locked and sealed, the house left empty, save for Hagar Winter, who had lived for a short time in the service of the family, and being known as a trusty, silent woman, was retained to stay in the

place until such time as Captain Darque's affairs were settled, and he should be enabled to return with honour to it.

That was why Morristhorpe Grange looked so desolate and deserted. That was why, as the village people passed by it, they invoked a curse upon him through whom shame or poverty of theirs had come. That was why no light of warmth or welcome shone from its barred and shuttered casements, nor sound of friendly footsteps broke the silence of its great gloomy halls. And well might Lois Fletcher say, as she carried her little nursling through that rusty old gateway, dripping with damp, and half buried in fallen leaves—

“Eh, honey; but I'm thinking it's a dowlie life you'll live in the like of such a place as this.”

CHAPTER VI.

BUT there is a fine adaptability in human nature; a merciful law of compensation, too, in the dealings of Providence, so that no day is ever all dark, and into the dreariest of lives there falls from time to time, as sunshine amidst November gloom, some ray of brightness, some gleam of hope, to keep it sweet and pure.

If it was not in Hagar Winter's power to give out those tender and loving influences which make the happiness of a child's life, she could at least shelter that life from actual pain and privation. If no soft kiss ever rested on little Opal's lips, if no hand of blessing night by night was laid upon her head, if she was

never drawn with affection's strong gentleness to the heart of the woman who supplied her daily needs, and gave her all she knew of a mother's care, she never learned from Hagar Winter the pain of being scared by angry words, or chilled by undeserved reproaches, or frightened by those outbreaks of temper, which often crush the delicate flower of a child's trust much more than an uncertain or selfish love can cherish it.

Opal grew up in her own wild, unrestrained fashion, cramped in nothing but the expression of her love; and that, since as yet she had no one to draw out the love, could scarcely be called a privation. A child's love for those who tend it is an instinct, but the forthflowing of it is not an instinct; it must be taught, and no one taught Opal. But through the first years of her childhood she had no more sense of want in this, than has the cage-bred bird who looks through the shelter of its pri-

son house to woods in whose leafy cover it has never sung, and to sunshine whose warmth and glory it neither knows nor pines after.

As soon as she was able to trot about without Hagar Winter's guiding hand, she used to stray into the deserted garden, and there, through the long summer days, amuse herself amongst the tall, rank grass, pulling the daisies, crowing and laughing to herself,—though truly the child's laugh had a strange sound in that so long silent and desolate place—and chasing the butterflies as they skimmed about from blossom to blossom of such hardy plants as could struggle up through the tangled undergrowth of weeds, which seemed to claim the place as their own.

She had no childish playmates. None of the village children ever came to Morristhorpe Grange. The only nurse-children Hagar had

ever taken were sent to her from a distance, except Eulie Guildenstern, the doctor's motherless little girl, and she was a frail, delicate child, scarcely allowed by her aunt, Miss Armitage, to play about beyond the safe limits of Mr. Guildenstern's garden. Very few people came to visit Hagar Winter either, she not being a woman who cared for companionship; and those of the village gossips who would have thought her their equal, not being such as she wished Opal to know. For Hagar was refined beyond her station. She had read and thought more than most people gave her credit for. The mistress whom she had served so faithfully, finding in her the capability of culture, had given her many opportunities of improvement; and in her speech and bearing there was a quiet self-possession which might almost have befitted a lady born. None of the gentlewomen who once bore sway in that old Grange, though dowered with all

pride of ancestry, and grace of courtly breeding, could have instilled into little Opal's mind more lofty ideas of honour, or a truer sense of straightforwardness and rectitude, than she gathered up almost unconsciously from the daily life and example of this grave, quiet, stern woman, to whose care a dying mother had bequeathed her, and from whose silent influence she was daily absorbing the materials of a character, finer, perhaps, than that mother could ever have given her.

Hagar Winter was very careful too, not to let her foster-child associate much with Amos Durben, who, bound though he might be to herself by ties of kindred, was no brother in that kinship of soul which is the only true and lasting bond. And indeed Opal, as she grew up, seemed to shrink from him. There was something in the fawning servility of his manner which repelled her. With instinctive pride and independence, she turned away from his

attempts at familiarity. Child though she was, she evidently felt that this man was no companion for her, that he belonged to a life quite apart from her own; and if sometimes in the still autumn afternoons when Hagar was busy with her work in the house, Opal strayed away to the reed-fringed margin of the mere, where Amos lay crouching with his dogs behind the osier screens, strayed there to amuse herself by watching the brilliant plumage of the wildfowl, as they skimmed hither and thither over the shining pools, or lay at rest among the water-lilies which grew so thickly and whitely there, he could never beguile her to him by promises of sweets or stories, or win her to sit by his side and amuse him with her childish prattle, as he waited patiently hour after hour for the wildfowl to come into the nets which he had prepared for them. And rather than be helped by Amos Durben over the patches of

marshy ground, which often kept her from wandering on in quest of flag flowers and yellow iris blossoms, she would turn proudly away and go back to the old garden, the scorn of a little princess in every step and movement. Better lose the flowers than have to speak her thanks to Amos Durben for them. Better keep to the rank grass in the deserted garden, than be lifted by Amos Durben's hands to the fairest islet on all Morris-thorpe mere, and then have to touch those thin cold lips of his for the kiss which he would fain exact as the price of the favour. And Amos, as she shook her head, and flashed her eyes away from him, would mutter to himself—

“’Tain’t no odds to me. She may keep herself to herself, for all I care. But maybe there’ll be a time when she won’t be so keen of showing her airs to them as can help her over a miry place.”

For there is nothing which stings so deeply as a child's contempt—stings so deeply because it is so real and unaffected, because, too, it never comes anywhere undeserved. Many a man who cares little for the slights of men, can ill brook the neglect of a little child; the averted eye, the curled lip, the gesture of unconcealed aversion, which, because they spring from instinct and not from whim, leave behind them so bitter a sense of humiliation.

Once only, after Hagar Winter undertook the care of Opal, did the child fall into any other guardianship than her own; and that was when the poor woman, suffering from the temporary insanity to which she had been subject at intervals ever since the first attack consequent upon Mark Renneson's desertion, was obliged to be taken for a short time to the asylum at Cardington.

Her malady was never violent, and she was

generally warned of its approach by previous nights of restless wakefulness. Then she would set her house in order, make what arrangements were needful for her absence, tell her brother what was coming on, and ask him to go with her to the asylum. There a few weeks of gentle treatment generally restored her, and until she was able to return, Mrs. Martin, the sexton's wife, used to supply her place at Morristhorpe Grange. When she came back she looked paler and sterner than usual; but no questions were asked, no remarks were made. Things fell into their usual orderly track. Mrs. Martin took her departure, and all went on as before, until the cloud which always hung over that poor sad life had had time to gather and break again.

But that forced absence of Hagar Winter's had been indeed a dreary season to Opal. Her childish aversion to Amos Durben had

turned his careless indifference into absolute dislike. When her protector was away, he found himself able to revenge the scorn which had been so galling. Opal was in his power then. Amos Durben, like most other fawning, servile men, was a tyrant at heart. He only wanted a favourable opportunity, and then no Nero or Domitian could have persecuted a helpless victim more unmercifully than did that silent, stealthy, crouching decoy man of Morristhorpe mere. It was a positive pleasure to him to inflict pain upon those who had once slighted him. He seemed to gloat over the unhappiness which they were powerless to resent. And upon Opal his malice fell with a weight increased by the fascination which her childish independence possessed for him. He disliked her, yet he could not help being drawn towards her by the very scorn with which she kept him away. He hungered for power

over her, even if it was only power to make her suffer.

That month during which Opal came under the yoke of his oppression, left a scar on her memory which the child never forgot. It coloured her whole life. It wrought into her very nature the elements of resistance and defiance. It roused within her a shrinking mistrust of all who sought to win her as he had first done, by feigned kindness and caresses; and it caused to glow in her little heart a fire of passionate wounded pride, which, once kindled, could never die down again into the meekness of childlike humility and confidence.

And so the time passed on until Opal was nearly seven years old. She was indeed no beauty, as Amos Durben used to tell her with many a scoff and shrug when he passed her on his way to the decoy, she hiding away from him as far as she

could amongst the overgrown shrubs of the deserted garden. She never gave him the chance of speaking to her now amongst the reeds and marshes, for she would scud away like a startled wild-fowl, if, as she was gathering the mere-flowers, she chanced to hear his low whistle, or caught a glimpse of his crouching figure behind the osiers. And only when she knew he was safe away at Cardington market with his string of ducks and widgeon, did she venture to those sedgy pools where the marsh-flowers grew, and the dragon-flies skimmed about amongst the shining green leaves, and there amuse herself by twining wreaths of river weed, or weaving the reeds into little boats, which she launched on the mere, and watched until the tide floated them far away, quite out of sight behind the islands, where the moor-fowl had their covert.

She was an elfish, weird-like little crea-

ture, quaint and shy, yet with a dash of proud defiance about her. Amos Durben had said quite rightly that she was no beauty. She was too tall for her years, and her figure had the ungainly awkwardness which generally accompanies overgrowth. She might, as Lois Fletcher prophesied, make a fine-looking woman, but certainly childhood gave her little of its rounded prettiness. She was silent, too—slow to be won by word or look of kindness; yet there was a strange wealth of pent-up earnestness and passion hidden away behind that restless, defiant little face; hidden away because she had no one upon whom to spend it. For Hagar Winter, though she did her duty to the child, did it with no show of love or tenderness. All that sort of thing had been put away by her long ago—laid to sleep in a grave from which it could have no resurrection. For the sake of the kindness which the child's mother had showed

to her, she would have given her very life to shield that child from evil. She would have worked for it, toiled for it, starved for it, stinted herself of food and raiment that the orphan might be warm and full; but she could not give that which, to the strong yearning, passionate nature of little Opal, would have been more than food, more than raiment, more than all outward comfort and cherishing. She could not give her the love which distills like dew—the sweet, womanly tenderness, beneath which only a child's heart grows and ripens, and truly learns to live. She could but feed the caged bird, and keep it safe from harm. She could never teach it to feel the strength of its little wings—never open the doors of its prison-house, and bid it soar away into the clear fresh sunshine, where it might have been so happy. That freedom must be given by other hands than hers. Hagar Winter did what she could. She did indeed what

none other would have done for the alien nursing, but she could never give all that a nature like Opal's needed from those who had it to tend, and train, and cherish. Still, it would come in its own time; and what the child had never known she could not truly pine for yet.

There was a school in Morristhorpe, kept by an old woman, who taught the village girls to read and write for twopence a week, and for an extra penny instilled into them Bible knowledge and arithmetic. But Hagar would not let her foster-child go to it, lest, by mixing with the village rustics, she should learn their speech, and copy their uncouth ways. So she taught Opal to read from a primer, which had been her own earliest school-book; and when the child was old enough, she bought a slate and pencil, and guided her little fingers through the mysteries of pot-hooks and straight strokes, supplementing these studies by-and-by

with such slender arithmetical lore as was still in her possession. Then, in winter afternoons, whilst Amos Durben smoked his pipe, or snored by the kitchen fire, Hagar would repeat, with grave, monotonous voice, those Bible stories which children love so well to hear—repeat them without comment or remark; nor would she ever reply to any of Opal's questions respecting them; for truly they told of a life into which she had little insight, whose passionate joy and sorrow could touch her heart no more now. Only she had listened to them in her own youth, and she knew no other way in which to beguile those long quiet winter days. And when the story was done, and Amos had awakened from his sleep, Opal used to creep into a dark corner of the room, out of sight of his cold, sneering face, and there sit thinking her own thoughts, dreaming her own dreams, until Hagar called her to repeat her evening prayer.

But when that prayer was said, no kiss for blessing or farewell was ever pressed on the child's lips before she lay down to sleep in the little crib by her foster-mother's side. And if, as in her simple speech, she murmured out the words which night by night, from so many an English homestead, rise like sweet incense to the steps of the great white throne, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us," she chanced to look up into Hagar Winter's face, there was a cold, stern look upon it, which chilled the little one's heart.

For Hagar had never forgiven Mark Renne-son his trespass against her, and in the strong pride of her heart she scorned to ask from God what he, whom she once loved more than God, had not received from her.

CHAPTER VII.

WHEN Opal was ten or eleven years old, Hagar Winter intended to send her away somewhere to school, that she might be taught to earn a living for herself afterwards as certificated teacher in some village in the neighbourhood. To raise the funds necessary for this purpose, Hagar was working very industriously at Honiton lace-making, an accomplishment which she had learned from her mother, and in which she had acquired great skill, her natural fineness of touch and neatness of hand giving her unusual facility for the work. She used to support herself by it in girlhood, after the health of her parents failed, and also during those three years, when she waited so

patiently for Mark Renneson's return from abroad. Whilst she had lived with Opal's mother, too, it had been the favourite occupation of her leisure time; and now she was applying herself to it more diligently than ever, encouraged by the success which she had already had in disposing of her work to several wealthy ladies in Cardington.

Since Opal came to her, she had laid by a considerable sum in the savings bank; and she hoped that by the time the child required to be sent away to school, she should have earned sufficient to meet the expenses of the first few years of her education. After that, she thought Opal might be employed in the school as pupil teacher, and so do a little towards supporting herself until she was able to take a regular salary. The child was sufficiently forward for her years. Hagar had no fears for her success in life, if only she could be kept a little longer from asso-

ciating with the untaught village children and learning their ways and taking up their uncouth speech. And perhaps sometimes, as the silent woman sat over her work, weaving those delicate buds and sprays which seemed to show such a strong contrast to the hard, rigid face above them, she might let her thoughts drift away from the cruel past into the future, far off yet possible still, wherein this child Opal should give back to her some of the care and some of the shelter which now she laboured so painfully to afford to it. Yet, had she known that never a thought or word of gratitude would be returned for all that she was spending now, her care would have been the same; not one act of duty would have been withheld, not one hour of toil given less freely. She gave, hoping for nothing again. If she could only have forgiven as freely as she gave; but that she could not do.

As it fell out, however, Hagar Winter never

needed to touch that little hoard which she had accumulated in the Cardington savings bank, for the benefit of her foster-child. The hard vesture of circumstances which, chrysalis-like, had closed Opal round from babyhood, was about to break away and leave room for the life within to stir and grow.

Scarcely ever, since more than seven years ago now, Lois Fletcher brought her to Morris-thorpe Grange, had Opal passed through the rusty old gateway which led from the garden, over the moat into Mr. Lester's meadowlands, and then to the turnpike road. Hagar Winter rarely went to the village herself. She was not a woman who cared for gossip; and besides, she was anxious to keep Opal out of the way of the village people, who might ask questions and raise thoughts in her mind with which it were better for her not to be troubled. She never went to church either, for she could not join in the prayers which were said there,

and she was too honest to take words upon her lips which had no meaning for her heart. She had her own stern, rigid ideas of duty. She followed what she thought was right. She did no conscious ill to anyone. As she wished that they should behave to her, so she behaved to them; and that being the case, she was content. She taught Opal her catechism as she had learned it in her younger days, and heard her say a Bible verse now and then, and allowed the child to amuse herself by spelling out a chapter as often as she liked; and instilled into her such precepts as she thought might help to make her an upright, faithful, honourable woman. But as for church, she had never darkened its doors since Mark Renneson came home, years and years ago, and she stole silently in one sunny Sabbath morning to get a sight of him and his bonnie bride. That was Hagar Winter's last service. Next time a church roof sheltered her would be when her

coffined body lay beneath it for blessing and prayer of priest, ere the green sod covered her for ever.

It was summer time. The haymakers were busy all round Morristhorpe, but nowhere so busy as in Squire Lester's tract of meadow land, which was only separated from the Grange garden by that crumbling stone wall and the moat, almost dry now, for there had been no rain since early June, and the lilies were all dead, and the withered flag-leaves rustled as the wind stirred them; and only here and there, under some shelving bit of bank, did a stray tuft of river weed show green amongst the last year's leaves.

Mr. Lester's only child Gilbert, a sturdy, broad-shouldered, ruddy-faced lad of fifteen, at home for holidays, with his chosen school-mate, Lancelot Guildenstern, the doctor's son, and Lancelot's little sister, Eulie, a child only a few weeks younger than Opal, used to come

every day to have a frolic amongst the hay. Eulie Guildenstern was a pretty, fair-haired little creature, fragile and delicate as the wind-flowers, whose tiny bells tremble amongst the moss and fern in spring time. Her aunt, Miss Armitage, who had a great horror of coughs and colds, would fain have kept the child a prisoner at home, never suffering her to go beyond the limits of her father's garden; but the doctor was a sensible man, and insisted upon it that his little daughter should have as much liberty as she could enjoy; so, under the guardianship of her nurse, Bessy Dobbinson, Eulie used to come every day to the hay-field, and sometimes, whilst Gilbert and Lancelot amused themselves by tossing the new-mown hay about, she would leave her nurse's side, and stray down towards the moat to pluck the forget-me-nots which grew so rankly quite up to the walls of the Morris-thorpe Grange garden. When the moat was

dry, she would play about in it, and even climb to the other side, to grasp the roses and honeysuckle, whose sweet-scented clusters hung down over the low stone coping, almost within a child's reach.

Hagar Winter used often to see her playing there. But though she had once nursed the child, and been like a mother to it, she never took any notice of it now. Her heart had never warmed to the child, even when it lay a helpless baby in her arms. She had done the best she could for it, in giving it food and shelter; and when the time came that these were needed no longer, she had let it go from her without a single regret. She wanted no love that it could give. She did not care even to see it again. She had done her duty by it, and that was enough. Besides, what was she, that any child should love her now?

One morning, having thus strayed from her

companions and the nurse, Eulie crossed over to the farther side of the moat, and lingered by the Grange gateway, peering into the neglected garden. With one hand she gathered up her little pinafore in front of her, for the better holding of some cherries which Bessy Dobbinson, the nurse, had given her as an inducement to good behaviour. For Bessy loved a frolic with the labourers as well as anyone, and often whilst Gilbert and Lancelot buried each other under the fragrant hay, and little Eulie munched her cherries, or plucked forget-me-nots by the moat side, the rosy-faced damsel would take the opportunity of holding a little confidential chat with Ben Bletchley, old Joe Bletchley's eldest son, a stalwart young fellow, who would be wanting a wife some of these days, and appeared not at all disinclined to turn his thoughts in the direction of Mr. Guildenstern's buxom nursemaid.

The garden gate was open this morning,

for Amos Durben had gone that way into the village, to help one of the farmers in making up his accounts. For full ten minutes Eulie had been flattening her little nose against the rusty old bars, and meditating upon the wilderness of weeds and flowers which lay beyond them.

At last, with the fine unceremoniousness of childhood, she walked straight into the garden, Bessy Dobbinson being engaged in a flirtation with Ben at the further end of Squire Lester's hay-field.

Opal was lying on the grass, sunning herself in front of the mouldering balustrades, which showed so many a tint of brown and russet and purple upon their lichened flutings. At the sound of Eulie's footsteps she sprang up and gathered herself into an attitude of defiance; and then the two children stared at each other only as children meeting for the first time, can stare; a real, genuine,

undisguised, wide-open look of mutual questioning and criticism.

To say that, in her seven years' experience of life at Morrishorpe Grange, Opal had never seen a live little girl, would be somewhat, though not very much, overstating the truth. For twice, during that terribly dreary month when Hagar Winter was at the Cardington asylum, Mrs. Martin, the sexton's wife, who was a regular attendant upon the outward means of grace, had taken the child to church, and with untold expenditure of effort in whispering, coaxing, nudging, threatening, and warning, compelled her into something like decent behaviour there. And as she stood on tip-toe on the hay-stuffed bass by Mrs. Martin's side, cowering away as far as she could from Amos Durben, and peering over the tall narrow pews, she could see several little bonneted heads outstretched like her own in quest of interest or amuse-

ment during the singing of a dolefully long *Te Deum*. Afterwards, too, as she came out of church, clinging tightly to Mrs. Martin's gown—for the crowds of well-dressed people, all looking so very grave and severe, as if they knew how often she had been scolded and nudged and threatened during the service, rather awed her—she had caught sight of the owners of these aforesaid little bonnetted heads, capering about in the churchyard, and playing hide-and-seek amongst the grave-stones; and she had listened in mute astonishment to their riotous glee as first one and then another got tripped up among the long grass. But she had never spoken to any of them, never dared to meet their advances to friendliness, or to return any of the nods and stares which some of the more adventurous amongst them felt called upon to direct towards her. She had only taken a firmer grip of Mrs. Martin's black

stuff gown, and hidden her face behind Mrs. Martin's huge bombazine cloak, and experienced a bounding sensation of freedom when she was once more safely at home amongst the weeds and dead leaves of the old Grange garden.

So that she might almost be said, as she and Eulie Guildenstern stood staring at each other in front of those mouldering balustrades, to be enjoying for the first time in her life the delights of conscious communion with one of her own species.

Scarcely enjoying it, however; for it must be confessed that her first impulse was one of antagonism. She sprang to her feet, doubled up her little hands, and was preparing to defend herself against this young creature who had dared, unbidden, to intrude upon her loneliness.

But something in the meek, gentle, pleading little face stayed her. It was nothing to

be afraid of. It could not do her any harm. Yet it was strange. She did not like it. She wanted to be alone. More than ever Hagar Winter's presence had done, the presence of this child seemed to enter into the solitude of her nature and ruffle it. So she turned, and was going to wander away into some undisturbed corner, when poor Eulie, stumbling over a great rhubarb leaf, which had strayed across the path, fell, and the cherries rolled out of her pinafore in all directions.

She began to cry piteously. Then, stronger than self-defence, fear, or shyness, rose the instinct of protection in Opal's heart. She ran and picked little Eulie up, set her on her feet again, rubbed the streaks of mould from her hands and face, gathered up the cherries, put them in her pinafore, and then stood staring at her again, with a certain mute questioning wonderment in her great

dark grey eyes, mingled now though with a touch of wistfulness; for that little act of kindness, given and received, had drawn out the first fibre of sympathy which Opal had ever felt for any human being.

Eulie, delivered from the perils of the rhu-barb leaf, opened out her pinafore, and, having ascertained that the cherries were safe, held it up to Opal, who understood from this gesture of invitation that she was expected to help herself. But the proud little thing shook her head and turned loftily away. Hagar Winter had taught her never to accept a reward for kindness done.

Eulie turned away too, the tears gathering in her eyes, and with down-drooping head went slowly back to the gate, while the cherries dropped unheeded one by one from her pinafore. Before she got quite out, however, she turned back again, and with faltering, timid steps came up to Opal, who was

still staring after her, though with no expression of pride or defiance upon her face now.

Eulie tried to reach her lips, but could not, for Hagar Winter's awkward, elfish foster-child was tall for her age; and, besides, not having the remotest idea of what Eulie wanted to do, she made no attempt towards lessening the distance between them. Only she seemed more bewildered and uncomfortable than ever, whilst yet, as if fascinated, she stood there, looking at the meek, anxious, loving little face uplifted to her own, vainly asking for something which she knew not how to grant.

"Me want to div oo a tiss."

And with that Eulie raised herself on tip-toe for one more brave attempt, and at last succeeded in getting her arms round Opal's neck, so as to bring her down on a level with herself. And then, for the first time, there rested on the little alien's lips the sweet soft touch of love, rousing the slumbering

soul within, and stirring it into warm, immortal life.

"Miss Eulie! Miss Eulie!" and Bessy Dobbinson came tramping into the garden with red, impatient face. "Where have you been all this time? And I declare your pinafore in such a mess as never was, and all your cherries gone too! I'll tell your aunt, see if I don't, and then you'll never be let to play no more, you won't. Come your ways home directly. How *dare* you go over there, and your papa so careful as he is of your putting your feet into the wet!"

Eulie, mute and trembling—for indeed Bessy Dobbinson's accents were awful in their severity—pointed to Opal, and then, taking hold of her nurse's hand, trotted penitently away, with many a backward look of love and longing. They had just reached the old gateway when Opal rushed after them.

"Want more!" she cried, passionately.

"Want more! want more!" and she stretched out her little hands eagerly. They were stained with the juice of the cherries which she had been picking up for Eulie.

"Oh! you naughty girl!" said Bessy, pushing her rudely away. "Then it's you that's been and gone and eaten all her cherries, you naughty, greedy, selfish girl, and now you're wanting to have some more. Get away, you little greedy thing! I can't abear you. No, you shan't touch her, you shan't, and I won't let her give you nothing no more."

But it was Eulie's sweet kiss that Opal was thinking of, and not the red-ripe cherries, when she cried out so passionately, "Want more! want more!"

CHAPTER VIII.

OPAL turned away and lay down on the grass again, weeping bitterly, for the gates of love and sorrow had at once been opened in her heart.

Hagar Winter had taught her that it was very wrong to be greedy, and that there was nothing in the world so contemptible as selfishness. No one had ever called her greedy before, not even Amos Durben; no one had ever called her selfish. She had only known the existence of such faults by being warned against them. She felt now that she had been unjustly judged. A child soon feels that, especially a proud, shy, silent child; and from that time she disliked and mistrusted Bessy

Dobbinson, as children do dislike and mistrust those who have wronged them.

Next morning little Eulie came to the hay-field again with Lancelot and the nurse; and soon finding her way across the moat to the gate, peered wistfully through its rusty, moss-grown bars to the Grange garden. Ever since early morning Opal had been waiting for her there, pacing restlessly about, and casting many an impatient glance over the low stone wall, beyond which lay Squire Lester's meadows. And yet when Eulie did come, the child's first impulse was to dart away into some out-of-the-way corner and hide herself. After gazing at her for some time from behind the shelter of a great rose-tree, Opal came forward with wavering, irresolute step, longing to look once more through Eulie's bright loving eyes to the soul which had so strangely touched her own; yearning to listen to the sound of that trembling little voice, yet afraid to be

attacked again by injustice and oppression in the shape of Bessy Dobbinson.

Bessy was standing among the haycocks on the other side of the moat, and when she saw Opal creep irresolutely forward from the covert of the rose-tree, the indignation of yesterday burst forth in a fresh torrent of angry violence.

“Miss Eulie! Miss Eulie! don’t go near-hand her again. She’s a nasty, naughty, greedy little thing, she is. She ate all your cherries up, the mean, selfish creature; and she only wants to see if your pa’s given you some more. Come your ways back, Miss Eulie, I say, or I’ll tell your aunt, see if I don’t, and then she’ll never let you come into the field no more to pull the pretty flowers. Your pa says greedy children wants whipping.”

Opal’s eyes flashed ominously. The silent little waif had a spirit that could be roused

to vehemence, of which even objurgatory Bessy Dobbinson had no conception. She had crept very near to Eulie before the nurse began to shout at her, and was gazing timidly, almost reverently, at the gentle child, scarce daring even to touch the tiny hand which was held out to clasp hers. But where love made her timid, passion made her bold. Leaving Eulie's side, she bounded away out of the garden, sprang across the moat, scrambled up the farther side of it, and like a young tigress flew at Bessy Dobbinson, setting her little white teeth into that astonished damsel's arm, and kicking her with might and main.

"I didn't eat her cherries!" she cried, with sobs of mingled anger and indignation. "I never touched one of them; and I hate you, you great ugly woman! You're a toad—you're a Midianite!" Opal's ideal of detestability, ever since she read the history of Joseph and his brothers, had been a Midianite. "I

do hate you! I'd kill you if I could, you cruel old thing! I only wanted her to kiss me."

And then, bounding back to Eulie, who stood in helpless amazement within the gateway, she cried—

"Kiss me again. Oh! *do* kiss me again!"

"No, don't, Miss Eulie, don't do no such thing!" shouted the enraged Bessy, rubbing her damaged arm and setting her disordered dress to rights again. "She's a nasty, savage greedy thing, and she only wants to bite you all to pieces. I hate them common childer. They're always——"

What Bessy Dobbinson would have said further remains uncertain; for just at that juncture Eulie's brother Lancelot, a bright, spirited lad of fourteen, came tumbling out from a heap of hay, under which Gilbert Lester had been burying him, and gave quite a new aspect to the state of affairs.

"Now, Bessy, you can just shut up. She isn't a common child, and she's served you right for going and calling her names. Here, little girl," he continued, jumping across the moat, and going up to Opal, "you didn't steal her cherries, I'm sure you didn't; you only wanted to be friends with her; and I like you very much, because you're ever so plucky. Bessy, you clear out right away, and let the children do as they like. I won't have that little elf snubbed any more. She's worth fifty great cabbages like you."

Bessy tossed her head, and muttered something about "imperence"; but Master Lancelot had a will of his own, and was more than a match for her, with all her noise and shouting.

"Poor little girl!" he continued with boyish kindness, smoothing back the hair from Opal's flushed, tear-stained face. "Don't you get into a passion again—it makes you look

so awful ; but you shall love my little sister Eulie as much as ever you like, and I'll take care that old red-cabbage doesn't fly out at you any more. There, there, now don't cry ! I hate to see girls cry."

For kindness melted Opal into tears as easily as wrong roused her into passion ; and Lancelot's comforting words, though expressed with genuine boy-like roughness, had completely overpowered the poor child, who stood by Eulie's side, sobbing as if her little heart would break. With a great effort, however, she conquered herself, swallowed down her tears, stole one glance of intense gratitude into the face of her boy-champion, and then, seizing hold of Eulie's hand, carried her off into the deepest recesses of the garden.

After that for many days, so long as the haymaking lasted, Eulie used to come every morning to the gate, to get speech of Opal,

who was always watching for her. By-and-by the children seemed as if they could not bear to be away from each other. Opal was only content when Eulie's little arms were folded round her neck, and Eulie's soft kisses pressed upon her face; while into Eulie's life, hitherto frail, weak, uncertain, Opal's love poured new strength. All that the children had to give they gave to each other. Their love; Opal's, ardent, impetuous, intense, springing forth with fierce energy through all restraint of circumstance; Eulie's, simple, trustful, tender, was like a rehearsal in childhood of that other love which, whenever it came, by whomsoever kindled, could scarcely stir their hearts into a quicker, more beautiful life.

But one morning Opal watched in vain for the sheen of Eulie's golden hair behind the bars of that rusty old gate, and the sound of Eulie's plaintive little voice murmuring—

"I come, Opie. Will oo let me in?"

All day Opal wandered restless, impatient, among the weed-tangled paths, and climbed on the top of the old stone wall, and looked over Mr. Lester's meadow to the village. Eulie never came. And another day passed, and another, and the light began to waver in her eyes, and she grew peevish, fretful, irritable. She could not sleep; she could not eat. She lay still, hour after hour, among the tall rank grass in front of the old balustrades, her face to the ground, the tears slowly creeping over her pale cheeks. Once, as she was wandering listlessly about, she caught sight of a faded flower which Eulie had brought into the garden and dropped there. She seized it almost savagely, hugged it to her, and burst into a fit of crying, calling upon Eulie to come back to her. She forgot even to be afraid of Amos Durben, and was too weary and dis-

pirited to shrink from him, if he threw some sneering malicious word to her as he passed the garden on his way to the decoy. She seemed to have sunk where his scoffs could scarcely reach her.

Hagar Winter saw that something was amiss with the child, but she asked no questions. She dealt with her as she would fain have been dealt with herself, when trouble came. Perhaps it was the wisest thing she could do, to be silent. A child's grief, if not touched with true sympathy—and so to touch it was out of Hagar's power—is best left untouched.

On the third day, as Opal lay among the grass in the old garden, listless, weary, distressed, Lancelot Guildenstern leaped the moat, and came running into the gateway.

“Where's Eulie?”

That was all the child said to him, but her little wan, tear-stained face, and the sha-

dows under her eyes, told how much she had suffered in those three days of loneliness. No more than others, older and wiser than herself, could Opal bear the cup of love's sweet content to be so soon taken away from her thirsty lips.

"Eulie's very poorly," said Lancelot, "and she wants you to go and see her as soon as you can."

Without another word Opal was on her feet, speeding away to the moat, her eyes gleaming, her long hair streaming away behind her. Only one thought in her mind, Eulie ill; only one purpose, to see her as soon as possible.

"Stop, I say!" shouted Lancelot. "You don't know where to go."

Opal turned with a gesture of fierce impatience, and then rushing back to him, she said.

"Tell me, can't you? Why don't you tell me!"

And she stamped her little feet impatiently;

all the listlessness, all the weariness, gone now.

“I can’t take you directly. Papa said I must go and ask the woman—I mean the person who takes care of you, if she could let you go. What do they call her?”

“You mean Mother Hagar. Come quick, then.”

And Opal took hold of his hand to drag him to the house, forgetting all her shyness in anxiety to be off and away as quickly as possible. With the fine humility of a child’s love and reverence—and since Lancelot’s championship of her, he had been her ideal of both—she had scarcely dared to speak to him, far less show any of those signs of affection which passed so often now between her and Eulie. Already, with love’s quick instinct, she felt that to Eulie, she, the stronger, could give; from Lancelot, she, the weaker, could only receive.

“Mother Hagar! what a queer name! Well, I must go and ask Mother Hagar if I may take

you with me. Or stay, if you like you may go and ask her yourself. Tell her papa said I was to come and fetch you."

Opal set off at full speed, and presently came back accompanied by her foster-mother, to whom Lancelot, with the involuntary respect which every one, high or low, gentle or simple, gave to Hagar Winter, repeated his father's message—that Eulie was ill, and not able to go out, and that his papa had sent him to ask if Opal might come and stay with her.

For Eulie had said she was sure she should soon be better if only Opal would sit by her and take hold of her hand.

So Opal was made ready, and she and Lancelot Guildenstern set off to Morrishorpe. Hagar Winter watched them, as he, with boyish, protecting kindness, lifted his little companion over the stiles, and checked her when in her eagerness she would have taken the wrong turning.

"It won't last," she said to herself. "It won't last. Better for her, maybe, if it could. She must learn to go alone. It's what the most of us have to do."

And then she turned and came slowly back to the house, putting her hand to her head as if in pain, while that restless, anxious look came into her face which had changed it so when Lois Fletcher startled her by waking suddenly and screaming on the night that Opal was brought to Morristhorpe Grange.

She lay down for a little while, then tried to go on with her lace-making; but her fingers trembled, the work seemed to dance and quiver before her eyes. Sometimes she twitched it with angry impatience, strangely unlike her usual calm, quiet manner. Sometimes she laughed a low unnatural laugh, or sobbed hysterically. Even that little excitement of Lancelot's coming had been too much for her. It seemed to disturb the balance of a mind

whose sanity was only preserved by absolute quiet. For hours afterwards she was restless and excited; and not until a night's rest had brought back something like peace, was she able to go about her duties again with that grave rigid patience which had become the daily habit of her life.

They kept Opal at Mr. Guildenstern's for several days. Her presence seemed to bring back Eulie's strength. It was as though a magnetic current passed from the stronger to the weaker; as though the almost wild intensity of Opal's nature vitalised that of the frail delicate child, whilst she in her turn gave out an influence of peace and quietness which calmed Opal's passionate restlessness. The two were essential to each other. Henceforth, until that perfect love was given which alone fulfils the human heart, it would only be a half life which they lived apart.

When Opal came back to Morrishorpe

Grange, Amos Durben was away. He had gone to look after a situation in London. For the decoy was to be given up. That part of Morristhorpe mere was going to be filled in for a new line of rail, which would pass through the village to Cardington, across part of Squire Lester's farm; and even if the decoy could have been moved farther up amongst the sedge and reed banks, beyond Morristhorpe Grange, the noise of the traffic upon the line would have prevented it from being worked with any success. So Amos was obliged to turn his attention to some other mode of getting a living; and as he had friends in London who he thought would be able to help him, he had gone to consult with them as to the best means of advancing himself.

He came back in a state of great exultation. He was going to make a man of himself, after all. A better piece of business had not happened to him for a long time than the proposed

giving up of Squire Lester's decoy, making an opening for him, as it seemed likely to do, into an entirely new line of life. For in London he had met with an old companion, who had just returned from Melbourne with a fortune, gathered up in a few years of hard working there. This companion had told him that Melbourne was the very place for him—that a man who had any amount of skill and perseverance, or, what was better still, sharpness, and a moderate stock of learning, could get on, and make himself independent in a quarter of the time that it took to earn even a crust of bread and cheese in the old country, to say nothing of as much beer as would wash it comfortably down. He had come over himself to see a few of his friends, and let them have a notion how he was getting forward; after which he intended to go back to his store, and make another ten thousand or two, before settling down as a retired gentleman at home.

If Amos liked, he could go too. Now was the time. Gold had been struck—work was worth any price. He might try his luck at the diggings, or, better still, in those centres of industry and commerce, from which almost all the available labour had been drained to the new gold-fields. The vessel was to return in about a month. He would guarantee him a situation of some sort, for new arrivals were always eagerly picked up, and could command any wages, if only they were steady and trustworthy, and not afraid of work. People who were in haste to be rich had all gone off to the diggings, but those who knew better were staying behind, and availing themselves of the almost fabulous sums which were paid for labour now. And then, when he once got a footing in the place, he had nothing to do but to go on, stick to business until he made a fortune, and so come home to show his friends

what a man could accomplish, when once he had broken away from the old moorings, and made a fair start in life.

So Amos decided to go to Melbourne. He had sharpness, he had perseverance, he had a moderate stock of book-learning, he had a little spare cash in the Cardington bank—why should he not do as others had done? He only came home to get his things put together, and his affairs settled before starting. There was not much time to spare. The *Fearless*—the same vessel which had brought Lois Fletcher over seven years before—was to set sail at the end of August, and he and his companion had taken their passage in it. He had made all needful arrangements in London. He only wanted Hagar to look him up his things for the voyage, and help him to set himself straight with his accounts for Mr. Lester. After that he would trouble her no more, until, perhaps, he came back, in ten years' time, an independent

gentleman, fit to shake hands with the best man in Morristhorpe.

"Ay, and fit to shake hands with you too, you proud little baggage," he said to Opal, who, creeping close to Hagar Winter's side, had been listening to his story, scarcely able to conceal her delight at the prospect of his departure. "Fit to shake hands with you too. It's money makes the man all the world over, and maybe you won't always be so keen of flouting them as can give a hand to help you when you can't help yourself."

But Opal only bent her dark brows, and turned her face away from him. Child though she was, her whole nature loathed him, and she would rather have died than taken any help that Amos Durben could give her.

CHAPTER IX.

NOT many things had leave to trouble the course of Hagar Winter's life. That great grief which had fallen into it many years ago, so stunned the pulses both of sorrow and enjoyment, that whatever came afterwards, and touched only herself, mattered little.

Yet she was ill-pleased when Amos told her what he had done. That night, when he came home from London, and bade her gather up his things in readiness for the voyage to Melbourne, a presentiment of coming ill laid its cold touch upon her heart. Long after Amos had gone away to dream over his new prospects, she sat alone, restless and ill at

ease. And when, at last, after midnight, she lay down by Opal's side, it was not to sleep, but only to picture to herself all the sadness, all the misery which might come to the child, if, by some strange chance or accident, he should meet Lois Fletcher in that far-off country, and learn from her the story of her journey to Morristhorpe Grange with that poor little orphan nursling.

For he would be glad enough to injure Opal. Her indifference galled him, harmless though it was. Her scorn had entered into his soul. And Hagar Winter knew her step-brother of old; knew how little pity there was in that cold heart of his, how little honour, how little truth. She knew how neither tears nor prayers would hold him back, if ever he had the power, from repaying a thousandfold the bitterness which Opal had cost him.

Perhaps, had her mind been at rest, and

evenly balanced, this possibility of evil, which was, indeed, so far off and uncertain, would never have troubled her. But she was restless and unhinged now. She had never quite recovered the excitement of that morning when Lancelot came to fetch Opal away to the doctor's house; and this fresh anxiety, following before the other had had time to wear itself out, laid upon her a burden heavier than she could bear.

Time after time the sound of Morrishorpe church bells came across the meadows, telling off the hours with their faint, musical chime, but Hagar Winter slept not. The spirit of restlessness, sure prelude of coming evil, had taken possession of her again. In the grey dawn of the morning she rose, left Opal's side, and paced up and down the desolate old house, until there should be light enough for her to do her daily work.

.. After that she knew what must come. It

had come before. Its terror always lay upon her. She lived in the shadow of that worse than death, which takes the soul's life, but leaves that of the body untouched. Once already, since Opal came to Morristhorpe Grange, and more than once before, Hagar Winter had gone to her brother, and said to him, sadly, hopelessly, yet with such stern, uncomplaining firmness,

“Amos, you will have to go with me to Cardington.”

After that, old Mrs. Martin, the sexton's wife, had been sent for to attend to the house; and when Opal, missing her foster-mother's quiet step about the place, asked where Mother Hagar had gone, Mrs. Martin answered that she was staying with some friends at Cardington, and would come back soon. Nothing more than that. And after a few weeks Hagar did come back again, grave, composed as ever, only with a deeper touch of sad-

ness on her face, a sterner expression on the lips that never softened into smiles of love or tenderness. No questions were asked. She took up the old round of care as heretofore, heard Opal her simple lessons, told her the familiar Bible stories, or plodded on at the lacework, by the sale of which she hoped some day to lay by enough to be able to send her foster-child to school at Cardington.

So it was only the old story over again now. As soon as the grey twilight brightened into morning, she began to set the house in order. She made such simple arrangements as were needful for the comfort of those she was leaving behind; spread the morning meal, as usual, by the kitchen fire; and then, when she heard Amos stirring in the yard amongst his dogs, she put on her bonnet and shawl, and after one long lingering look at Opal, who slept quietly in her

little bed, unconscious of coming trouble, she went out to her step-brother, and said,

“Amos, you will have to go to Cardington with me this morning.”

Amos was not a man who made much outward stir about anything. Without a word he tied his dogs up again, dressed himself in his Sunday clothes, and set off with his sister across the meadows to Morrishorpe; where they went to the cottage of the sexton's wife, and bade her go at once to the Grange. Then they walked on together to Cardington, to the Asylum, a great red brick building, standing at a little distance from the town, in the midst of fields, with a high-spiked wall to it, and grating in front of the windows.

There he left her, and returning home, set about his daily work as usual, just as if nothing particular had happened; only that there was a shade of vexation on his face this

time, for Hagar's help would have been very valuable to him in preparing his things for the voyage; and she would have done what sewing and mending he needed without any reward, except a word or two of thanks—perhaps not even so much as that. Whereas now he would have to pay Mrs. Martin something considerable for attending to his clothes and washing them; and if there was one thing more than another which Amos Durben disliked, it was parting with his money.

Hagar Winter's occasional absences, and the cause of them, were well known in the village; so that when Mrs. Martin, the sexton's wife, who, in addition to her parish duties, washed for the doctor's family, took back her weekly basket of clothes, and excused herself for a day's delay in finishing them, by saying that she had been sent for to stop at the Grange, no surprise was excited, only

pity for the poor woman whose life needed no deeper shadow than that which the disappointment of her early hopes had cast upon it. But Eulie was playing in the garden when Mrs. Martin came up the walk with her basket; and as Bessy Dobbinson, who was always ready for a bit of gossip, listened to the detail of Hagar Winter's misfortune, the child caught up a few scattered fragments of the story—a story to which she would never have listened, had not Opal's name chanced to be mentioned in it. And Lancelot Guildenstern's loving little sister never heard that name without running up to hear something of the owner of it.

“It'll just be awful lonesome for the poor bairn,” said Mrs. Martin, when, having retailed Amos Durben's account of that dreary morning's work, she proceeded to speculate on the state of affairs at the Grange. “She just dwines and pines as she couldn't do

more if the woman was her own mother. And, indeed, I don't misdoubt but what she's been well done to, for that matter, though Mistress Winter never was a woman that gave more words than there was a need for, nor had them sort of ways about her as gets a bairn's love. I never heard anybody but what spoke well of her for doing her duty; and I will say this, she's gotten that hold on the little 'un, that she frets after her so as I can't comfort her noways. She just lies in the front garden among all them weeds and things—as I tells Mr. Durben it's a shame they should be let to be there, though the place has, as you may say, got a bad name to it—and she won't eat nothing nor speak a word to no one. And as for Mr. Durben, as quiet and smooth-behaved a man as anyone need to set eyes on, though he isn't to call handsome, she flies off as if she'd seed a ghost every time

she catches sight on him ; and if he offers to touch her, or ought o' that sort, law ! how she just does set at him, to be sure."

"Ay ! she will do that," said Bessy Dobbinson, remembering her own experience of Opal's powers of defence. "Let her alone for knowing how to take care of herself."

"Why, no. I wouldn't say she's one of that sort. She's well to do with, nobbut you let her alone ; but just she's a wonderful spirit upon them as she takes against, for all she looks so still and quiet like. I wouldn't say a contrairy word again her though, poor bairn ! for it's an ill time she has, now that Mistress Winter's away, and I sure I pity for her to see her lying there as she does, with no more life in her than a dead thing, and off her vittles, too, as she hasn't scarce put a bite nor a sup into her lips since I went to 'em, day afore yesterday. I reckon she won't hold together much longer if that's the way

she means to go on; and no telling, neither, when the t'other poor woman's intellecks may come back, so as she can give an eye to her again."

"Temper; that's what it is; nothing but temper. I lay I'd soon knock it out of her if I was you," said Bessy Dobbinson; and then she went to call Eulie in, and make her ready for her morning walk.

The child heard no more, but she had already gathered up enough to know that the person whom Opal spoke of as Mother Hagar, had gone away somewhere, and that Opal was in trouble about her loss. And after that, she never rested until she had gone to her papa, and asked him if she might fetch Opal home to stay with them again.

"For a long time, papa, until Mother Hagar comes back. Poor Opie unhappy; do let her come!"

Mr. Guildenstern, who could deny Eulie

nothing, for which those loving eyes, her dead mother's own eyes, pleaded so wistfully, told the child that she might even do as she would.

So that very morning, instead of being taken out for a constitutional on the Cardington Road, Eulie trotted away by Bessy Dobbinson's side, in company with Lancelot and Gilbert, to the desolate Grange garden, where Opal lay, like some wounded little wild thing, amongst the tall weeds by the lichen-stained balustrades, her face to the ground; no tears upon it, but only a look of desperate, uncomplaining pain.

"Opie, you to come home with me; be my sister. Papa says so."

And with that exceedingly brief, business-like intimation, and in spite of all Bessy's protestations that the angry, bad-tempered little hussy must have her face washed, and a clean pinafore put on, before she was fit to

walk through the village to a decent house like Mr. Guildenstern's, Eulie put her hand there, and then into Opal's, and the two children went away home together.

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CHAPTER X.

MR. GULDENSTERN, the Morristhorpe doctor, lived in a small house between the aristocratic end of the village, and the long, straggling, irregular street which was occupied by the lower classes of the rustic population.

It was a very ordinary, unpretentious-looking residence, called Chesnut Cottage, standing a little way back from the road, and almost hidden by a clump of fine old trees, from which the place took its name. On one side of it there was a gravelled yard, a gig-house and surgery; on the other a narrow path led along the back garden to an orchard, and beyond that to a small paddock

in which Mr. Guildenstern's black mare, Gipsy, was wont to spend her leisure hours after having taken her master for his daily round of visits in Morrithorpe parish.

People could remember the time, for it was not very long ago, when Mr. Guildenstern lived in a much larger house, the Morrithorpe doctor's own proper house, at the very genteel end of the village. Quite a gentleman's house, flanked on its southern side by the mansion of one of the landed proprietors, and on the other by the Rectory itself, a fine modern Gothic building, put up at the expense of the Admiral within the last few years. Mr. Guildenstern used to give dinner parties there, and elegant entertainments, to which guests came from far beyond Cardington—his wife was living at that time—and where neither champagne nor jokes were wanting to enhance the merriment of the assembly. For, in his young days, when first he married and

brought his bride to her new home, there was not a man in all the village more generous and hospitable, more fond of having his friends about him, and giving them the best of everything that money could buy, than Rupert Guildenstern of Morrithorpe, whose father, and grandfather, and great-grandfather before him, had lived in that fine old house at the genteel end of the village, and had kept up as hearty a hospitality in it as he did.

He drove his close carriage too, then, and kept a pair of thorough-breds for his own and his wife's use. People used to say many a time what a handsome couple they were, the doctor and Mrs. Guildenstern, as they rode down the village; he so brave and frank and upright in his bearing, she gentle, fair-haired, sunny-faced, almost like a child for slightness and daintiness. And when their first-born son, Lancelot, grew to be a strapping little lad of three or four, a pony was bought for him too,

and the village children used to stare after him with eyes of wonder and delight when, with the Guildenstern liveried servant by his side, he ambled round the green; his scarlet feather fluttering in the wind, the sunlight glancing on the brooches and buckles and buttons of the tartan velvet suit, which, as the conceited lackey never failed to tell when opportunity served, was ordered all the way from Edinburgh, that there might not be another like it in Morristhorpe.

But that sort of thing had quite changed, now. Seven years ago, Mr. Guildenstern had left his beautiful house by the Rectory, and laid down his carriage, and sold his thoroughbreds, and parted with his riding equipments, and had given over having grand dinner-parties and elegant evening entertainments, where the champagne and the merriment flowed in equal abundance. And Mrs. Guildenstern ceased to ride out in costly habit and plumed

hat by her husband's side ; and no more suits of velvet tartan, with due accompaniment of brooches and buckles and buttons, were ordered from Edinburgh ; and the little village children watched in vain for the splendid spectacle of Master Lancelot ambling round the green, attended by his liveried lackey. A new family, retired merchants from Cardington, came to the house where, for generations past, the Guild-ensterns had lived ; and the doctor removed to that very small but convenient residence, known in the auctioneer's list as "Chesnut cottage, situate in the parish of Morristhorpe." There he lived a very quiet life, making no display, keeping no company, doing his professional visits in a gig drawn by one not at all thorough-bred steed, and attended by a middle-aged serving man, very different from the pompous little tiger, all buttons and impudence, who used to rein up his master's horses with

such a flourish in the days of the Morristhorpe doctor's prosperity.

The truth was, Mr. Guildenstern had lost the whole of his fortune in a mining speculation. He happened to be one of Captain Darque's victims. When that unscrupulous scion of the aristocracy wanted money for his debts of honour, and raised it on the strength of the Penorfa mines, which were warranted to yield such splendid interest to those who invested in them, Mr. Guildenstern had been induced to become a holder to a considerable extent. The undertaking failed, as Captain Darque expected it would fail, when the doctor invested his own and his wife's fortune in it, but that was of little consequence. He had calculated upon plunging a few families into distress and ruin. He paid his debts of honour, reserved for himself a neat competence from the spoils of his indignant dupes, and leaving them to pocket their vexation and meet

the calls to which an unlimited liability exposed them, he shut up his house, went abroad, and in some quiet corner of France or Germany, as they supposed, was living upon what he had filched from them.

No one was more deeply involved than Mr. Guildenstern. But he was too proud to go through a court of bankruptcy, and so get rid of his difficulties. So he let his beautiful house, sold his plate, furniture, carriages, horses, and removed with his young wife and their one boy Lancelot, into Chesnut cottage, determined by rigid economy and hard work to keep his head above water; and even though the meeting of them made him a poor man to the end of his days, to meet honourably those calls which the directors of the Penorfa Mining Company found themselves so reluctantly, as they said, compelled to raise from time to time.

Mrs. Guildenstern never looked up again.

It was not the loss of wealth and position which grieved her, for she was one of those gentle, sweet-spirited women who, loving and being loved, are content. But she could not bear up under the altered life which straitened means imposed upon her. She had been reared in luxury, and the effort to adapt herself to a condition in which economy and contrivance and actual personal labour were needful, was too much for her. After struggling on for a year or two, she died, leaving behind her a little baby-daughter named Eulie, a delicate, ailing child, who, after its mother's death, was sent to Hagar Winter to be nursed and tended through the ills of babyhood; and in whose sweet features, as year after year passed on, those of the poor dead mother seemed to live again.

Miss Armitage, Mrs. Guildenstern's sister, came to live with her brother-in-law after his wife's death. She was a clever, practical wo-

man, never so much in her element as when planning, contriving, and adapting herself to circumstances. She managed the children and the house with admirable prudence, and did more than poor Mrs. Guildenstern herself could have done, by rigid economy and careful foresight, to eke out the doctor's sadly straitened resources. She was shrewd and far-seeing, too, with a fine talent for pushing her own way, and making a good bargain for herself, or for those in whom she felt an interest. A woman, moreover, who had no interior life, no spiritual nature worth mentioning; who lived entirely in external circumstances, and ruled her conduct according to them; who, if the religious element had been developed in her—which, however, was not the case—would have struck with vigorous energy into all sorts of public work, tea-meetings, bazaars, committees, sewing societies, and the like, rather than have devoted her-

self to the observation of frames and feelings, or the culture of silent aspiration. Her strong point at present, next to the sustentation of her own temporal welfare, was the interest of her sister's children; and, to do her credit, she would have sacrificed anything for that interest, except her own.

Next to this regard for the worldly prosperity of Lancelot and Eulie, which, as aforesaid, subordinate to a due consideration for herself, might be represented as the ruling motive of Miss Armitage's life, came her aversion towards the man through whose unscrupulous daring that prosperity had been so sadly marred. Her brows contracted, and her whole aspect darkened if the name of the owner of Morristhorpe Grange chanced to be mentioned in her presence. As soon as she came to take charge of her brother-in-law's household, she had little Eulie removed from Hagar Winter's care. She would not let the

unconscious child be sheltered by the roof beneath which Darque once dwelt, or be indebted for daily care and nurture to the woman who had received wages from him. But for his chicanery, as she often said to herself, she might, in virtue of the position which she occupied as Mr. Guildenstern's sister-in-law, have stood in the foremost ranks of Morristhorpe society. Lancelot might have had a splendid Continental education, and then have been established by his father in a first-rate London practice; so achieving wealth and honour, which could never be secured in a small place like Morristhorpe. Now, unless assisted by some of the more wealthy members of the family, the utmost that Mr. Guildenstern could do for his son would be to send him to the Glasgow University for his medical course, and then take him into partnership, so tying him down for the rest of his life to the society and habits

and disadvantages of a half civilised village.

As for Eulie, Miss Armitage could scarcely bear to think of the evil which Captain Darque's villany had wrought for her. But for that, she might have married into one of the county families some day, and kept her carriage, and had her house in town; and, in due time, if she had grown up with anything like the beauty and elegance of her poor mother, have risen to as elevated a station as that of the Grange people themselves, through whose unscrupulous dealings alone it was that such a magnificent future was shut out from her. What wonder, then, as she said to her brother-in-law, that she could not even bear their names mentioned in her presence, or that she felt so hard and unforgiving whenever she thought of them? It was only what ought to be expected under the circumstances; and for her own part she should rejoice to hear that Captain

Darque, and all who belonged to him, had met with the due reward of their evil deeds, in ruin and disgrace ten times more terrible than that which he had brought upon others.

Yet Miss Armitage was a very good professing Christian, and prayed regularly every Sunday that she might be delivered from hardness of heart, malice, and all uncharitableness.

She had even looked coldly upon the childish friendship of Eulie and Opal, because she could not endure the thought of her niece going to Morristhorpe Grange, the home of people who had wronged her so cruelly; and it was not until after a hard fight with her own pride, and a still harder contest with Mr. Guildenstern, whose very life seemed bound up in that of his little daughter, that she had yielded so far as to allow Lancelot to fetch Opal when Eulie was pining away so in the summer months with hay-fever.

She hated the sight of Morristhorpe Grange, or of anyone who had anything to do with it. And though, as Mr. Guildenstern very justly represented to her, Opal did not belong to the Darque family, and ought not, therefore, to suffer for the wrongs which they had done, still she lived where they once lived, and was surrounded by the same belongings amongst which their villanous plots had been hatched; and the air of the place, and its influence, seemed to linger about her, and she brought its associations with her when she came to that quiet, unpretentious house amongst the chestnut-trees, where, for no fault of theirs, her poor dear sister's children were living such a different life from that to which they might reasonably have looked forward.

And she had another hard struggle, too, when Mr. Guildenstern yielded to his little daughter's pleading, and consented for Opal

to come and stay with them until her foster-mother was able to take care of her again. For, as Miss Armitage said to her over-benevolent brother-in-law, it might be weeks, or it might be months, or, for anything they knew to the contrary, it might be years, before that desirable state of things came about. Everyone, she said, who had had anything to do with cases of mental aberration, could tell how uncertain were the chances of recovery from such a condition as that into which poor Hagar Winter had fallen; chances which diminished with each successive attack, until at last health was almost impossible. Before the poor unfortunate woman was able to leave Cardington Asylum, the two children might have become so attached to each other that Eulie would not consent to Opal's going away again. In which case her brother-in-law, who seemed scarcely to have a thought except for his

little daughter's happiness, would make almost any sacrifice, even to the entire adoption of Opal, to secure it. And Miss Armistage had made up her mind to one thing, namely, that if any arguments of hers, just or unjust, it mattered not, could avail to prevent Opal from becoming established in the household of her brother-in-law, such arguments should not be wanting. But it was of no use.

"Eulie wants companionship, and companionship she shall have."

That was all Mr. Guildenstern said when his practical sister-in-law had set the case before him in its darkest aspect; had represented to him, with the utmost of her eloquence, the additional expenses that would be incurred, and the risk that would be involved in taking a child into the family under such circumstances.

For, as she said, not without a show of

reason, if Hagar Winter never was able to come out of the Cardington Asylum, and Mr. Guildenstern once took the child under his roof, waif and stray as she was, belonging to nobody, having no claim, so far as they could ascertain, upon either friend or relative, who would be responsible for her after-maintenance? To whom was she to look for protection during the many years which must elapse before she could do anything to earn a living for herself? And did Mr. Guildenstern think that he would be doing justly by his own children to take the bread out of their mouths, and feed a stranger with it? Could he—so the excellently orthodox Miss Armitage suggested—expect the blessing of Providence upon his professional labours, whilst he was appropriating the results of those labours to one who had no claim upon them, no interest in them? Was he not working hard enough already to support those who

belonged to him in decency and comfort, and to lay by the means of putting Lancelot through a professional course, without taxing his insufficient income with this new burden?

And then again—Miss Armitage thought that if all other arguments failed, this never could—would it be any true kindness to the child to take her into a home which so far exceeded anything to which, under Hagar Winter's guardianship, she had been accustomed? Putting out of the question Mr. Guildenstern's own responsibilities, would it not be in some sort cruel to surround Opal with the refinements, not to say luxuries of life—for alas! those insatiable Penorfa mines left little margin for luxuries—but at any rate, the refinements and elegancies of life, and give her companionships above her own station, and afford her the means of culture; and then, when she had become, as they

might say, dependent upon these things, throw her back again into her old position, amongst her former mean belongings and associations, which could never content her any more,—which, instead of contenting her, could only be a daily source of annoyance and humiliation? Miss Armitage thought her brother-in-law had scarcely considered all the bearings of the question with his usual calmness and intelligence, when he agreed to such a thing as having Hagar Winter's foster-child in their own family, until the poor woman was able to take charge of her again.

Mr. Guildenstern listened to what his worthy sister had to say, and then took his own course after all, as he generally did in matters of real importance. He was a man who could look at things in other aspects than those which touched his own interests. Nor did he, with the weakness of a shallow and selfish nature, allow circumstances which had

injured himself to affect those who had not been responsible for them. He looked at the position of Opal quite apart from those associations which Miss Armitage could never in her own mind disentangle from it. He knew Amos Durben, he knew Mrs. Martin, and he had seen enough already of Opal to be sure that she could never live a wholesome or natural life with either of these two people. Besides, he had marked how Eulie's life brightened since the influence of Opal's stronger nature blended with it: he watched how the dim eyes gathered brightness, and the wan face more of childhood's laughing glee, as the loving little heart found at last what it so much needed, what it had been pining for so long—some one to spend that love upon. And he knew that to separate Eulie from Opal again, would be to give her back to the old languor and the old weariness, so pitiful because so unchildlike; and perhaps to worse

than these, perhaps to disease or death itself, so strangely now did her existence seem to hold itself by that of Opal.

So, without any further speech or counsel with Miss Armitage, Mr. Guildenstern went to Morristhorpe Grange, and told Amos Durben that it was his intention to keep Opal at his own house for the present.

CHAPTER XI.

AMOS DURBEN was quite willing to give up his responsibility, so far as Hagar's foster-child was concerned. Her unconcealed aversion galled him, he was glad at last to have her out of his sight. Child as she was, he felt humiliated by her scorn, for he felt it was so genuine; and he knew that he deserved it, too.

Besides, he was irritated by his want of power over her. He could frighten and pain her, but his nature could not fasten upon hers to draw the life out of it. He could not reach her spirit to tyrannize over that, to bring that to his feet, cowering, submissive, subdued. There was ever an untamed,

tiger-like freedom and swiftness about the weird, pale-faced little creature; and even as he stretched out his hand to crush her, she leaped away from him, though trembling, untouched still. He was compelled to own himself powerless, except to irritate and annoy her.

And then he wished to make his arrangements for leaving Morristhorpe entirely. Perhaps, except for that, there would have been a certain satisfaction to a man of his nature in having some one about him over whom he could tyrannize with impunity, some one upon whom he could spend the ill-will, and exercise the petty persecution, which must find an outlet either at home or abroad. But Amos could not afford to indulge his tyranny at the expense of his self-interest, to keep Opal near him for the sake of torturing her, when that would have involved anything like a marring of the projects which he had form-

ed for his worldly advancement. So he bowed very low when Mr. Guildenstern explained his intentions with respect to the child. It was necessary to be rid of her in some way, and if this unlooked-for opening had not presented itself, Amos had made up his mind to settle Opal as a parish servant with some of the little shopkeepers of the place, and then leave her to shift for herself, while he went to seek his fortunes abroad.

"Indeed, sir," he said, with fawning servility, eyeing Mr. Guildenstern, meanwhile, as though the Morristhorpe doctor had been an unusually fine specimen of wild duck just on the point of committing itself to the tender mercies of his decoy—"indeed, sir, it's the mercifullest thing as a blessed Providence could have handed out for the poor child, it not being according to reason that I could make her comfortable, same as my sister Hagar could have done, and her always used

to children, and had the tending of them, first one, and then another, ever since she come to the place. And it isn't common ways as does for the little one either, sir; for though I never heard tell whose she is, nor where she come from, she's that nippish and particular, as she ought to be a born lady to keep it up proper. My sister Hagar never told me no more about her, nor that she was sent here to be took care of when her mother died; and my sister was always reckoned a good hand for that sort o' work. You see, sir, with having lived maid to bettermost sort of people, she had a kind of way with her as folks might think she was better brought up nor the common."

"But she's been took in, sir, this time, I do believe," continued Amos, still crouching, and shrugging his shoulders, as he looked stealthily from under his brows towards Mr. Guildenstern. "I never heard tell of no

money being paid for the child's keep, nor anything of that sort; while it lies strong upon my mind as them what belongs her is dead, or something like it. Leastways, they don't trouble their heads about her, nor hasn't, to my knowledge, ever since she come to this place. But if my sister chose to give her the bite and sup when she had earned it herself, it was no concern of mine. Women have queer notions sometimes, sir, saving your presence; and my sister was always one of that sort as when she said she'd do a thing, she stuck to it, let it cost what it might."

"Yes," said the doctor, "I have always heard Hagar Winter was a woman to be depended upon."

"Ay, sir, and you may depend upon her for self-will, too, as I've often told her it was her best look-out to put the child where them as gets the slip from their rela-

tions ought to go. But my sister never would listen to nought of that sort, and she always said that while she'd a bite and sup of her own, the child should have half on it; and she'll stick to it, that she will; not as I know she sets much store by the bairn, but just you see, sir, she's given her word, and my sister's a woman that never goes again her word. But I'm quite agreeable, sir, for you to do what you like, and I shan't make no objections no way, me never having had a hand in the child's coming, nor going, nor nothing."

Mr. Guildenstern was not ill-pleased to learn that poor little Opal belonged to nobody, that she was thrown adrift in a world where none but a half-lunatic woman seemed to take any interest in her. The desertion of her by her own kindred, if she had any, only gave her over more entirely to himself; not that the child had indeed so

much hold upon his heart, though he was a kindly, well-disposed man; but from her companionship, little Eulie, the one joy and treasure of his life, seemed to win such happiness. That in itself was enough to secure Opal a comfortable home. But for that, her strange influence over Eulie, Hagar Winter's foster-child might have tossed about long enough upon the waves of what men miscall chance, before they had drifted her into such a fortunate haven as that in which she was about to be landed. A haven where, if not much true unselfish love waited her from anyone but Eulie, she would be at least sheltered from rude associations, and find what Hagar Winter had so earnestly coveted for her, the society of equals.

It was in early autumn, just as the reapers were beginning to put in their sickles to the golden brown harvest fields, that Mr. Guildenstern formally announced to his sister-in-law

the arrangement which he had made with Amos Durden for Opal's removal to his own family; where he intended her to remain until Hagar Winter re-appeared to claim her. And that time was more distant than either he or Amos Durben, or even Miss Armitage herself, thought.

Towards the end of September, Lancelot went away to a school in Germany. Some of his father's friends, knowing the lad's dislike to Morristhorpe, with its humiliating associations, and his strong inclination to follow the profession of the law, were giving him a helping hand, and had promised, in case Mr. Guildenstern's means were still further crippled, as they seemed likely enough to be, by the results of his unfortunate mining speculation, to furnish Lancelot with the means of going through the inns of court when his college studies were finished.

Gilbert Lester went with him. The two boys were fast friends, and it was an agreement between them that wherever one was sent, the other should go, when the Cardington master, who had hitherto taught them both, should need to be replaced by some more advanced instructor. After a few years' spell of work in Germany, Lancelot was to go to college, and Gilbert was to be sent off to Canada to see the different systems of farming there, before settling down at Morrishorpe, as his father's successor on one of the finest estates in the parish.

Amos Durben, too, packed up his outfit, went to London, and set sail with his old companion for Melbourne, where in due time he landed, obtained a good situation, and began to push his fortunes, with such success as will hereafter appear. But he never wrote to any of the Morrishorpe people to tell them how he was going on, or to make in-

quiries after his step-sister Hagar; for Amos was not a man who either made or kept friends, and though he had lived several years in Morrithorpe, few when he left it cared sufficiently for him to be anxious to hear how he fared in his new quarters.

The autumn days grew shorter. A touch of frost fell into the sunshine of the early mornings. The leaves began to change and wither and fall, just as they were changing, and withering, and falling, when, seven years ago, in the murky moonlight of a late October evening, Lois Fletcher had taken her first look at Morrithorpe Grange, and predicted for her hapless nursling such a dour life within its mouldering walls.

That prediction had not been altogether verified. Taking all things into consideration, Opal had lived as wholesome a life there, perhaps, as a nature like hers could have lived in any place, apart from a mother's cherishing

care, and all the culturing influences of home. Hagar Winter, though grave and cold, was not a harsh woman ; at least, she was never harsh to the orphan child of the woman who had once cared for and been kind to her. There was a certain nobility about her character, which had fostered its like in Opal, fostered it all the more successfully because of the material on which it had to work. All through that strangely sequestered and lonely childhood, the strength and endurance and self-dependence of her spirit had been developing, and the life so shut out from external influence had only lived more intensely and vividly within itself.

True, it was not a happy childhood, nor was it likely to be the prelude to a happy womanhood. Love and confidence, a child's best possessions, found no place in it. Hagar Winter never asked for love, never sought to win it by caresses or tender cherishing ways : and Opal was as

yet too young to give that honour and trust which her foster-mother so entirely deserved, She could not comprehend either the depth or steadiness of a devotion which never manifested itself in word or look, only in the quiet doing of duty. Grave, reserved, yet with a certain stern kindness about her, Hagar Winter won from Opal an awe which never passed into love, which only trembled sometimes into a dim, vague yearning for it, crushed back again before it had grown into the intensity of actual longing, by that strange mixture of apathy and sternness which, like a mask, she had worn through all the best years of her life.

And then Amos Durben's presence had been a continual torture to the child. His guileful, treacherous ways, first used to coax her into familiarity, and then to revenge himself for her indifference, had awakened within her an unchildlike spirit of defiance and mistrust. He

had done her a great injury, for he had taught her to doubt those who approached her with kindness, and to repel those who sought what she was now so slow to give—confidence. Opal's was a nature which needed much love to warm it into outward life. Even had circumstances been favourable, she could but slowly have developed that trust which in most children is an instinct. And in marring the little trust she at first possessed, in teaching her to doubt where she should have believed, to shrink back where she should have come forward, to shut up her confidence where it should have had fair play, Amos Durben spoiled the comfort of a life which indeed needed all the sunshine that could fall upon it from without.

Still, in the silence and seclusion of that life, many a rare flower found room to grow, which conditions more favourable to happiness might not perhaps so well have developed. At any rate she learned to be self-denying and self-de-

pendent; to make but little demand upon the kindness of others or their love, though far down in the heart of her there was a true woman's longing for both; to be content with scant show of attention and favour; to take, as her own, Hagar Winter's lofty standard of right and wrong; to prize herself for what she was, and not for what she seemed to be—for what she became, and not for what she did. And so far as a childhood ruled by thoughts like these, holds within it the possibilities of a noble womanhood, so far, despite the ungenial influence of the past, there was promise for Opal's future.

CHAPTER XII.

THE Autumn passed on. A dainty silvering of rime touched the edges of the red leaves which almost choked the moat round Morriethorpe Grange; and mists, dank, unwholesome mists, began to brood over the marshes that enclosed the garden. And as November blasts swept away the last shreds of foliage which all through the late Autumn-time had been doing their best to screen the gloomy old house, it seemed to show more grey and desolate than ever, like a face from which the light of a warm living human soul will look out again no more.

One cloudy afternoon, just as twilight was beginning to fall, a spare, neatly-dressed woman

with a bundle in her hand, came out from the Cardington asylum; and after doing a few little errands in the town, turned into the road which led to Morristhorpe.

It was Hagar Winter. She was quite well again, and was on her way home to the old Grange, expecting there to find her foster-child, and work for her and care for her and tend her as aforetime. She walked leisurely, for she did not wish to reach the village before nightfall. She would fain steal into the place unnoticed, dreading to meet the rude gaze, or, worse still, to encounter the half-curious, half kindly remarks and questionings of the rustic gossips, who always looked upon her, after her occasional absences, with a certain awe and wonder, as a person who laboured under some mysterious visitation, cutting her off from ordinary sympathy or companionship.

At the turnpike gate, about a mile from

the church, she stayed. The gate-keeper and his wife were strangers. They had come from a distant part of the country only a few days before Hagar Winter and her step-brother had set out for their last gloomy walk together through the meadows to Cardington. Knowing, therefore, that they would not recognise her, she knocked at the door and asked permission to rest for a little while by their fireside.

The gatekeeper's wife, a bustling, noisy, good-hearted woman, bade her welcome, saying that her "master" was gone to Cardington market, and she would be glad of some one to bear her company until he returned, late in the evening. So she stirred the fire, and, drawing an elbow chair close up to it, bade Hagar make herself as comfortable as she could.

"I daresay you'll have come a pretty fairish step," she said, eyeing her visitor's bun-

dle somewhat curiously; for, in common with most people, she liked to know a little about those to whom she offered her hospitality, so that if she did ever entertain angels, it might not be unawares. "From Cardington maybe? But you'll surely not be going past the village to-night, and falling late as it is?"

Hagar Winter was not a woman who said more about her own affairs than was absolutely needful. Accepting the woman's offer of rest and warmth, she set down her bundle and simply replied—

"I have come from Cardington, and I am not accustomed to much walking. I thought if you would be good enough to let me rest, I might get on to Morristhorpe before the houses are all closed."

And then, partly to divert the woman from farther questioning, and partly moved by that feeling which prompts people, when coming home again to any place after long absence, to

ask as though they were strangers in it, of those whom they knew and loved; choosing rather to hear of any change which may have happened so, than from friends, who might burden them with questions and remarks, Hagar began to enquire of the gatekeeper's wife how things were going on in the village. She knew it, she said, some time ago, when Amos Durben and his step-sister lived at the old Grange. Did they live there still, and was the little girl with them?

"Bless you! no, that she isn't," said the woman, proud of having such a piece of news to communicate to anyone who knew the place. "There's nobody lives at Morristhorpe Grange now, but an old couple, man and wife, as somebody pays to keep the place a bit aired. Amos Durben went off across the seas this nearly three month past, and there hasn't been no tell of him since, as I knows on. You see, the 'coy was given up when they started of the new

rail, and so he was forced to seek his luck somewhere else. And no loss neither, for he was never a man as had over many good words from them as knew him best."

"And the little girl? He did not take her, I suppose?"

"Not he. If folks says true, Amos Durben isn't the man to do more for his own kith and kin than he's forced to do, let alone strangers. The bairn's better done for, I reckon, than ever he'd have done for it. She'll never want no more now."

"Is she dead?" said Hagar, and the poor woman could hardly still the tremor in her voice as she asked the simple question. For that was the way people spoke sometimes of those whom death had taken from need of human care; and Opal was all she had to care for in the wide world now.

"Not a bit, ma'am, nor likely, for it, neither. And if she was, she's gone to a good shop to

keep her from getting overfar on that road ; for Mr. Guildenstern, that's the Morristhorpe doctor, ma'am, as you may perhaps remember, if you knowed the place, has took her to live along with them, to play with little Miss Eulie his own daughter, a bonnie small slip of a thing a few months younger than her as used to live at the Grange. Amos Durben's sister had her to tend since she was a baby, but she were took out of her intellecks a bit back, and had to be shifted to Cardington asylum ; and then Mr. Guildenstern he said the bairn should never want for a home while he had one to keep over her head. You see her and Miss Eulie got wonderful fond of each other, while Miss Eulie couldn't abear to have her out of her sight ; and the doctor he was always that set on his little girl, he couldn't say her nay, let her ax him what she might."

"And so she asked for the other child to stop, was that it?" asked Hagar, trying hard

to speak with no touch of the eagerness which throbbed and fought in her heart.

“Ay, that was just it. She axed for the child to stop right away, when the poor woman were took out of her intellecks. And she’s the same as his own bairn now, and gets her learning along with Miss Eulie, and goes about with her, just for all the world as if she were a lady born, with the best of everything as Miss Eulie has it, and not a bit of difference made no more than if they was both equals.”

“But for that matter,” the gatekeeper’s wife continued, “I’ve heard some as doesn’t stick for to say for that one of ’em is as good as the tother; and I don’t wonder neither, for there’s that about her as doesn’t belong to the common; and Bessy Dobbinson, her as lives nursemaid to Mr. Guildenstern, and keeps company with Ben Bletchley—that’s Joe Bletchley’s son, foreman to Squire Lester,

as you may have heard tell of him if you know this here place—says she's that miraculous for sperit and pride, she might be a princess born."

"Ah!" and Hagar Winter turned her face into the shadow. "Then they do not know who she is?"

"No, not exact. She were put nurse-child to Amos Durben's sister when she were just off a baby; and nobody's never comed after her since, nor raised no call upon her, nor isn't likely to, now, I reckon, for she's a getting a good big girl, a vast taller nor what little Miss Eulie is. And Mr. Guildenstern he sets a deal of store by her, because of Miss Eulie being so fond of her; and he says he shall keep her while she's axed for, let that be when it may, and as long as it may; and she may think herself well off that he's in such a mind, for it's well done to she is while he has the doing for her. Which is what

a many men wouldn't take up with, if they were as hard set as he is, and him lossing his money with them nasty mines, as they say Captain Darque of the Grange got him draw-ed into. May be you know Captain Darque of the Grange, if you're not all a stranger in these parts?"

"Yes, I have heard about him. The people didn't used to speak very well of him, if I remember."

"That didn't they. As bad a fellow as ever stepped, if folks says true. And gives an ill name to the very ground he walked upon, as many a one in Morrithorpe village would tell you, if they dare speak true. But may be you know what he came to."

"Yes, but I think I'll be going now. I've got nicely rested, and I'm very much obliged to you."

"You're very welcome, ma'am. If you could sit you down a bit longer, I daresay my mas-

ter will be coming home, and he'd be glad to set you a piece of way on the road. It's rather lonesome from here to Morrithorpe village, and you by yourself in the dark; won't you sit a bit while he comes?"

"No, thank you," said Hagar, gathering up her bundle.

"I don't mind being alone in the dark. It's a thing I'm pretty much accustomed to, besides the moon is getting up a little. Good night, and thank you kindly."

"Good night, ma'am, and good luck to you."

Then she turned into the gloom and took her solitary way down that same road over which, on just such a dreary night as this, Lois Fletcher had carried Opal to Morrithorpe Grange.

But Hagar Winter did not go to the Grange now. When she reached the stile which led across Mr. Lester's field to the moat, she still

kept on her way towards the village, and went past the church to Mr. Guildenstern's house, that little old-fashioned house which stood back from the road behind a clump of chestnut trees, almost leafless now, but making a gloom in which she could linger unperceived.

She stole into a dark corner of the garden where she could see a glow of lamplight pouring out from the uncurtained window of one of the front rooms. Eulie and Opal were there. Opal, her little nursling, who for seven long years she had watched and tended, who had won from that poor dried up heart of hers all the love that it could give to any living creature, a love which alone had kept it from utter death and starvation.

For Hagar Winter knew nothing of that other and diviner love, which, when the soul has been swept of its idols, left lonely, untenanted, comfortless, can enter in and fill the empty place, bringing with it peace and stillness and

content. Hagar had never forgiven the wrong done to her many a year ago ; and so, like all other unforgiven wounds, it had cursed and blackened her life, instead of filling it with the sweetness which distils like balm even from the saddest memories of those who suffering much have also pardoned much.

Eulie and Opal were sitting together on the hearth-rug. Their arms were round each other's necks. Opal was reading aloud from a picture book which lay upon her knee, and now and then her face was lifted for answering smile or look from Eulie, who seemed to be listening with eager interest to the tale. She had lost the elfish, untamed expression which Hagar Winter remembered so well only three months ago. A happy brightness shone now from the eyes which used to reproach her sometimes with their restless melancholy. A new life had dawned upon her. All the childlike gloom and discontent had faded away. Much more had

been given her than mere food and shelter, even something to love and to live for, and to bring out the strong intensity of her nature.

The child looked so different too in her whole aspect and bearing, such a contrast to the uncomely little creature who used to wander about so listlessly amongst the weedy wildernesses of the old Grange garden. Hagar's own love of beauty had died out long ago, and though everything belonging to Opal had been ordered with the daintiest neatness, she had never been made to look pretty or enticing by any of those shifts of vanity which fond mothers love so well. Now she was tastefully, even elegantly dressed, quite like a little lady, as the gate-keeper's wife had called her, and as indeed she was, though no one knew it yet. Her crimson frock, with its delicate white embroidered frill, set off the transparent paleness of her skin; her black hair was swept away from the broad low forehead and knotted back with a bright

coloured ribbon, instead of hanging over her face in loose picturesque disorder as it used to do, three months ago. She was evidently well cared for, well tended, healthy, happy and content. She had no need to remember the years of her foster-mother's guardianship, except with thankfulness that they were over. She had better care now than any which had been given to her then. She had nothing to do but forget, as other children had forgotten those who once nursed and laboured and toiled for them when they were helpless and dependent.

Opal, her foster-child, the only one in all the world that she cared to love; needing no love of hers now; needing nothing any more that she could give.

There were no tears in Hagar Winter's eyes as she gazed through the leafless branches of the chestnut trees into the warm, fire-lighted room where Opal was smiling in childish content; but a feeling of utter dreariness and deso-

lation tightened round her heart. There was no longer anything left to live for. No one needed her. No one would miss her if she laid herself quietly away to the long long rest of death. Were it not better to take that rest ?

She longed to go into the house there and then, to seize the child, carry it back to Morristhorpe Grange, and live on there as they had lived before, Opal knowing no care but hers, she knowing no love, wanting none, caring for none, but that which Opal gave. Surely it was not very much, but it was all she had, and her poor withered heart clung to it as she never thought to have clung to anything again in the wide world. She must have the child. She must give to it what she could give to none beside. Opal was her only tie to life. It was not now what she could give to Opal, but what Opal could give to her, that kept her back from complete hopelessness and isolation.

But no. She had promised to herself to hold the child's welfare dearer than her own. She remembered what the gatekeeper's wife had said, that Mr. Guildenstern would protect Opal as his own daughter until she was claimed again, let that be when it might. Would she be doing the child a kindness to claim her now, to take her from a home where all was fair and pleasant, to such as she could give in that lonely desolate place by Morristhorpe mere? That lonely desolate place, blasted by memories of guilt, haunted for ever by recollection of evil deeds planned and purposed there. Was this all that she could do for the child, whose welfare she had promised to guard so securely—to take her away from fulness and content to meanness and poverty again? Were it not better she should go back alone to the haunted chambers of Morristhorpe Grange, that no life but her own should be vexed any more by its gloom and sadness? She had lived companionless

before. She could live companionless again, if need be. That was not the hardest thing to do.

But then when it was known that she had returned to the Grange, would not Opal be sent back to her? A wild thrill shook Hagar Winter's heart as she thought of the orphan child given to her again, all her own, her own, to keep and guard and live for. And then the sacrifice to which she had pledged herself, asserted its claim once more. Of course Mr. Guildenstern would think it right to restore the child to one upon whom rested its responsibility, and then how would Opal's life be straitened! From how fair and large a future would she be shut out! Were it not better that she, the poor lonely woman, upon whom there always rested the dim shadow of a living death, should never go back at all to Morris-thorpe Grange, should never trouble anyone with her presence more? She had but one

object, one interest, to care for this child whose mother had once cared for her. Now, the child did not need her care.

Once her life was Opal's only shelter; now her living might keep Opal from a better shelter. Were it not better she should die?

Yet she would fain hold her little nursling to her heart once more, before she bade it farewell for ever. She would fain take the memory of its looks with her into that dreary future whither it was wisest now that she should depart. One look, one word, and then away for ever.

But again she paused. Even that poor comfort was denied. For she had never taught the child to love her. No sweet kisses of hers had won its little heart; no tender words had told that she held it dear, that she would have given even life itself, long ago, as she was willing to give it now, if by such giving her trust could better have been fulfilled. Those who have

never been taught to love, soon forget. The strong pity which, little by little, had grown in her heart for the motherless child, had never found leave to show itself in smile or caress, only in faithful, silent devotion. She had never sought to bind Opal to her by those links of tenderness which sometimes hold fast when both gratitude and duty fail. All that the child could remember of her foster-mother was that mother's coldness and reserve; coldness and reserve which must so often have chilled her little heart. It were well not to remind her of them again. She would leave her even so, happy in her forgetfulness of a love whose depth and truth she had never known.

With one long earnest look, a look through which the whole wild pent-up force of her soul seemed to burn, she turned away; then returned, gave one more look, and coldly, passively, taking no heed of anything or anyone, still keeping in the shadow of the trees which skirt-

ed the village-green, bent her steps towards Mr. Lester's meadow.

Crossing the stile she soon reached the moat under the garden-wall of Morrishorpe Grange. It was full to the brink now, for that November had been a month of rain ; but the plank was there, affording to anyone who was tolerably steady-footed a safe passage across to the mouldering old stone gateway.

And Hagar Winter was steady-footed now. She knew what she was going to do. Not once did she shrink nor tremble ; not one quiver of fear passed over her pale, still face as she stepped along the narrow plank, and then, instead of going through the gateway, felt her way slowly, cautiously, under the wall, among the slimy damp leaves which choked up the path to the mere.

The night was cloudy, but the full moon had risen an hour before, and there was light

enough to reveal upon the grey murky sky the outline of Morrishorpe Grange. As Hagar lingered for a farewell look, how like it seemed to her own heart, so lonely and ruined and deserted ; its chambers untenanted, its treasures sealed, no light of welcome looking forth from its barred windows any more ; even the little spark of life which had once feebly flickered there in the days when she used to care for Opal, quenched now. She and the blasted old house had finished their work together. The sooner they were both done with now, the better.

Soon she reached the marshes along which lay the road to the decoy, and past the decoy to Morrishorpe Wash, with its reedy islets, haunt of coot and heron, its great swampy beds of flags and bulrushes, shivering now as the November wind swept sullenly through them. She sat down on a willow stump by the water's bank, startling, as she did so, a brood of wild

fowl, which hurried away with many a splash and flutter to the covert of the nearest sedge. Then she bent her face upon her knees, rocking gently to and fro, murmuring to herself,

“She may want a friend some day. She may want a friend some day. And then.”

She was still sitting there, when, long after midnight, the moon, having burst through the clouds, shone fair and high over Morristhorpe Grange, with its crumbling oriels and overhanging gables, where the bats crouched and the owls hooted, undisturbed by noise or presence of human thing. Shone, too, with many a silver streak among the glittering flag-leaves, and on the deep, dark, silent mere, so glassy and cold, which seemed to say to the desolate woman shivering beside it,

“Come to me, and be at rest.”

Next morning, as Squire Lester's labourers went that way to fodder their horses, they found a bundle containing some woman's cloth-

ing lying by the water's edge, and farther on a bonnet entangled amongst the reeds. They belonged to Hagar Winter.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE news soon spread over the village. The gossips met together to talk over the mysterious occurrence, and came to their own conclusions respecting it. All due inquiries were made. Mrs. Tuxford, the gate-keeper's wife, identified the bonnet as that worn by a woman who had come to ask rest at her fireside only the night before. She also recognized the shawl in which the clothes were wrapped; for she had taken particular notice of it as the woman laid it down. When the bundle was opened, Hagar Winter's name was found marked upon some of the articles. Then the Morristhorpe constable was sent to Cardington Asylum, and learned

there that a woman named Hagar Winter had been discharged the day before, and that she had told them she was going home to Morris-thorpe as soon as she had done some errands in the town.

The mere was dragged, but to no purpose. Indeed the tide had been running out since midnight, so that before morning the poor woman's body, if not entangled amongst the sedge and reed swamps, must have drifted away to the sea quite beyond any chance of recovery.

Perhaps, as the clergyman and magistrates said, whose duty it was to inquire into the circumstance,—perhaps coming home to Morris-thorpe Grange, in the gloom of the November evening, she had missed her way and fallen into the moat; for there were the marks of footsteps on the narrow shelving path under the Grange garden wall. And that path, when the damp, rotting autumn leaves lay thick upon it, was dangerous enough, even in broad day-

light. Or perhaps, being of unsound mind, she had intentionally destroyed herself, having, with the not unusual cunning of madness, placed her bundle of clothes so that she should appear to have fallen accidentally into the mere. Indeed, as all the attendant circumstances of the case came to be carefully sifted, that seemed the most probable conclusion.

Of course the fatality occasioned much remark, and deepened the shadow, already dark enough, which for years had rested on Morris-thorpe Grange. But in time the gossip wore itself away. When the circumstance was once fairly cleared up and accounted for, and all that could be said about it had been said, and a due amount of commiseration expressed for the unhappy woman whose life, always gloomy and uncomforted, had been quenched without one ray of brightness having been suffered at the last to relieve its misery, people laid the affair quietly aside, amongst other things of the past ;

and Hagar Winter's name was almost forgotten in the village, save as its connection with Mr. Guildenstern's adopted child served to keep it in remembrance.

Opal was not told at first that the poor woman with whom she once lived had been drowned in Morristhorpe mere; only that her foster-mother had gone away for a long time, and would perhaps never come back to her any more. And then Mr. Guildenstern added that she was to stay at Chesnut Cottage, and call Eulie sister, and himself papa, and never think about belonging to anyone else but them; for that he would take care of her now, just like his own little girl, and try to make her as happy as though she were Eulie's very own sister.

To which Opal listened gravely, not understanding very much about it. Only it was pleasant to think that she should always stay with Eulie now, never have to go back to Amos Durben again and be worried and teased by

him, or be shut up in the gloomy old cellar of Morristhorpe Grange, that terrible threat which Bessy Dobbinson held out whenever, as was not unfrequently the case, her own will and that of the spirited little alien came into collision. And since her feeling for Hagar Winter had ever been that of reverence rather than love—since the care and protection which the stern, quiet woman gave to her foster-child, though given from the depth of a devotion which could suffer and endure, and even face death itself, if need be, had never been so given as to awaken in the child's sensitive nature any deep passionate love in return, its loss did not greatly wound her life. She was conscious of no want when the name of Hagar Winter ceased to be spoken in her hearing. Better things were given to her now. After all, a child needs more than faith in the superior wisdom and power of those who care for it. It is not enough that it is warmed and clothed and fed, if the expectant heart finds no answering

touch to its instinctive longings for love and sympathy. Not until these are met, not until heart touches heart, as Hagar Winter's, cold, unforgiving, could never now touch any other, is that true kinship formed which a child seldom forgets.

Yet Opal had always had a consciousness of safety and rest in the presence of her foster-mother. There had been always security, if not comfort, by the side of that grave, pale-faced woman, who never suffered her love to express itself in one tender, loving word. Sometimes Opal had felt, with a child's quick, unerring instinct, that the love was there, though she could not get near enough to be warmed by it. But this instead of satisfying, had only distressed her, for it gave her an idea of something which nevertheless she could not grasp and enjoy. The dim, groping consciousness of a love which never shaped itself into actual tenderness, only perplexed her. Such as it was,

however, she felt safe in it. Perhaps in the protecting kindness which was given to her from Mr. Guildenstern, and the wealth of childish love which Eulie lavished upon her, there might be less of true, steady enduringness than in Hagar Winter's silent devotion. Perhaps the time might come when neither Mr. Guildenstern nor Eulie could give her what she needed; when only an unwavering faithfulness like that of her foster-mother, holding fast when affection and good-will were in vain, could make a safe haven for her in the storm and tumult of life.

For Hagar Winter looked forward into a future which might not be far away, when, shivering beside the flag-leaves of Morristhorpe mere, she said of Opal,

"She may want a friend, some day."

But still, so all the people said, it was a fine opening for the child; and nothing less than providential, considering the very uncertain

prospects which lay before her so long as she remained at Morristhorpe Grange. For no one knew how often those attacks of Hagar Winter's might have come on, nor how long they might have lasted. And in the case of her lengthened absence, who would have cared for the child, and looked after her education, or kept her from growing up in habits of indolence? Perhaps it was as well that things happened as they did. Mr. Guildenstern's kindness had stood between Opal and the workhouse, certainly not the most desirable place for her; yet the only one, so long as no information could be gained respecting her parentage.

For, though all Hagar Winter's drawers and boxes had been thoroughly searched before her possessions were sold, and the money deposited in the Cardington bank, to Amos Durben's account, he having the only legal claim upon it, nothing was found that could in any

way lead to the identification of the child ; not a trinket, nor a keepsake, nor a scrap of writing in which she was mentioned, nor a single article of dress bearing a name which might possibly belong to her. Amos Durben was the only person who was likely to know anything about her, and he had already told Mr. Guildenstern all that his step-sister had told him, namely, that the child had been sent to her to nurse, that its mother was dead, and that she had promised to take care of it and bring it up until it was able to earn a living for itself. They were not even sure that the Christian name it bore really belonged to it. It might only have been bestowed by Hagar Winter because of a tiny locket which was found upon the child when she was brought to Mr. Guildenstern's house ; a plain, heart-shaped golden locket, of not much value, save for a little opal stone set in the back of it. And whether that locket was the child's own, or had

been given to her by her foster-mother, who having lived in good families, might have received some such little token of esteem, they could not tell.

Such was Opal's history—all, at least, that could be ascertained of it. And by and by, as the excitement occasioned by Hagar Winter's death wore itself out, Morristhorpe ceased to trouble itself about the matter.

CHAPTER XIV.

AND so the time passed on, with little of outward interest, Morristhorpe burying its old people, and marrying its young ones, ploughing, sowing, reaping, gathering into barns, holding thanksgiving services with due decoration of parish church, undergoing partial immersion occasionally beneath the redundant slime and slush of the mere, and then breaking out again next spring into unwonted wealth of pasturage and meadow land, until Hagar Winter's foster-child had been living for ten years at that old-fashioned house among the chestnut trees on the village green.

If Amos Durben could have left Melbourne and revisited the place where most of his early manhood was spent in the noble occupation of destroying wild fowl, he would have found but little change in it. True, the decoy was done away; for that part of the mere which supplied it, had been drained for the new Cardington and Pondgate railway line, which passed within a mile of the parish church, and greatly annoyed the more aristocratic inhabitants of the place by its smoke and noise. Annoyed them more, because, with all that it had taken from them of seclusion and quietness, it had not given them so much as the benefit of a station, its nearest halting point being the Marshpools, a hamlet between Morrishorpe and Pondgate. But, except the railway, everything else was just the same. In wet seasons the farmers put on wading boots and walked ankle deep over their fields, uttering no complaint; for they knew that next hay crop would more than make up

for it, and cause the tenants, beyond Cardington, who laughed at them now, to grow lean with envy. Still the quaint old homesteads uplifted their thatched roofs, shut in by well stored barns and rick yards, in the midst of fertile acres which were worked by labourers who lived as simple a life, and then dropped away to as unknown a future as their forefathers, sleeping so quietly now under green mounds in Morrishorpe churchyard, had done before them.

Year by year the old Grange took on an aspect of greyer desolation and decay. And lately, to the ill name it had always borne for the broods of evil deeds which, within the memory of living man, had been hatched beneath the shadow of its mossed gables, there was added the mystery of some actual ghostly visitant, which completed the ill fame of the place.

Once, a year or two after the night of Hagar

Winter's disappearance, a railway labourer, returning late from his work across Squire Lester's meadow, declared that in the misty November moonlight he saw the figure of a woman, clothed in long black trailing garments, flitting noiselessly along the margin of the mere, amongst the tall bulrushes and shivering flag leaves; and that when it reached the spot where Hagar Winter's bundle of clothes had been found, it slid down with a shriek behind the sedge and disappeared. And as the labourer was a quiet, honest, steady-going man, well known in Morristhorpe, where he had lodged since the commencement of the railway works, and bearing a good character for sobriety, his statement was accepted among the village people as perfectly correct.

Of course, after that, the place was considered haunted. Even in broad daylight the Morristhorpe rustics would rather not pass it, if by any other road they could reach their destina-

tion ; and he indeed was a sort of hero among them, who, after dark, dared to waken the dreary stillness of the place by sound of footsteps under its crumbling walls, or to linger alone on the brink of those reedy marshes, where, though only one had actually seen the baleful apparition, it still, according to the village gossips' story, walked every November evening after twilight, sometimes in ghostly silence, sometimes with moan and shriek and wail ; until, always by the same tall shining clump of flag-leaves, it sunk and disappeared in the black waters of the mere.

The house was quite untenanted now. A sort of fatality appeared to have followed all who tried to make a home for themselves within its gloomy, desolate chambers. Hagar Winter had found a watery grave almost under the very shadow of them. Mrs. Martin, the sexton's wife, who usually took care of the place in Hagar's absence, had been, as the village

people expressed it, "stricken for death," a few weeks after she went there, when Amos Durben was preparing to go out to Australia, and only came back to her cottage in Morristhorpe to linger through a month or two of pain, and then be carried to her grave in the churchyard. The aged couple who, after her removal, were appointed to the charge of the house, had not been there a year when the woman was found dead in her bed; and scarcely had gossip ceased to busy itself over her fate, when the old man, crossing the moat at night from Mr. Lester's meadow, missed his footing, fell, and after lying in the mud all night, was picked up by Ben Bletchley, with a broken leg, which proved the death of him.

That seemed to put its finishing touch to the gloom which for so many years had gathered round the old Grange. No one else came to the place then. The furniture was carried away; when, where, or by whom, even old

Mrs. Dobbinson herself, who knew everything that transpired in the village, was never able to find out. Mr. Lester's hind who lived across the mere, could only tell her that one night he saw lights glimmering from the upper windows, and next morning there were wheel marks on the decaying leaves on the servants' court-yard. And ever since then, Morristhorpe Grange had been uninhabited, except by the owls which hooted under the shadow of its lichened eaves, and the bats which crept into them for shelter as the daylight dawned.

Mr. Guildenstern, and his sister-in-law Miss Armitage, still lived in the old-fashioned little house behind the chestnut trees; she hard, shrewd, clever and worldly as ever; he still toiling patiently on at his professional work, doing the best he could to retrieve his failing fortunes and keep his head above water. For Lancelot's college expenses were becoming heavy, and the Morristhorpe Guildensterns had never yet been

beholden either to relative or stranger for the means to put their sons forward in life; and the directors of those Penorfa mines felt themselves, as they said, reluctantly compelled to make call after call, which one at any rate of their victims was too proud to meet by borrowed capital or a formal deed of bankruptcy.

Gilbert Lester was still abroad. While Lancelot was studying Justinian's Codes, and making himself acquainted with matters of the law, previously to entering Lincoln's Inn and being called to the bar, broad-shouldered, ruddy-faced, honest-hearted Gilbert was gathering up such experience as he could in the back woods of Canada, whither his father had sent him to live with an uncle and become acquainted with various systems of farming. He went out for five years, and the last of them was drawing to a close. When he returned, he was to take his father's place on the Morristhorpe mere estate. A good place too, and one that

any young man might be proud to take, as the small farmers of the parish said every time they walked past Squire Lester's fat grazing lands and waving cornfields, and surveyed the substantial homestead, good enough almost for the Admiral himself, which stood in the midst of them, sheltered by tall poplar trees, and flanked by such a goodly array of offices and farm buildings.

But it was not only the small tenants of Morristhorpe who cast admiring glances towards Squire Lester's substantial house, and speculated on the probable yield of the fertile acres which surrounded it. The Morristhorpe young ladies too—Miss Amy Freestone, the clergyman's eldest unmarried daughter, a pretty girl just fresh from school in London ; and the two Miss Bellairs, daughters of Jonas Bellairs, Esq., the retired die-sinker from Cardington ; and Miss Luxmore the heiress, who lived with her uncle old Septimus Russell, at the large house on

the green, and who was well known to be an aspirant after matrimonial preferment, together with half a dozen other village beauties of more or less substantial charms—were all looking forward with unconcealed interest to the young Squire's return, and the changes which that return would most probably bring about in Morristhorpe mere house.

For all these young ladies knew Gilbert Lester was by no means a common farmer's son, and that the maiden on whom he fixed his affections, supposing he brought any home to fix, would by no means live the life of a common farmer's wife in that comfortable old homestead, with its vineries and shrubberies and peach walls, its green-houses, hot-houses, and orchard-houses, its kitchen garden and flower-garden, its velvet lawns and smooth-shaven croquet-ground; to say nothing of the business-like farm-yard accessories in the back-ground of these modern appliances. The richest young lady in the par-

ish might do worse for herself than assume the mistress-ship of an establishment like that of Morristhorpe mere farm. Nay, if she played her cards well, the future Mrs. Gilbert Lester might take rank with the landed gentry themselves, and in virtue of her husband's broad acres and well-filled purse, though he had nothing more on which to build his position, might even aspire to a recognition from the Admiral's lady, an honour which would at once and for ever place her amongst the upper ten of Morristhorpe society. So that young Gilbert, Lancelot's old school-mate, little Eulie Guildenstern's childish play-fellow and protector, was not likely to want either attention or flattery, supposing that he was of a disposition to be easily moved by either, when he returned from Canada to take his father's place in the village.

Eulie and Opal were both in the first bloom of maidenhood now ; that bright happy hopeful time, when if a young girl has an innocent heart

and a peaceful home, she cannot help being attractive, even though a disposing providence may not have dowered her, as it certainly had not dowered Mr. Guildenstern's daughter, with the more worldly advantages of purse and fortune.

And truly one might have gone far to find a sweeter, daintier, more rose-bud like little creature than Eulie Guildenstern, as she tripped about the old house behind the chestnut trees, busy-ing herself in domestic matters, or flitted round the flower-beds in her father's garden, herself, as he half sadly, half proudly said, the fairest flower of them all. For her childish languor and weakness had quite passed away, now. Opal's companionship, Opal's love, had brought the roses to her cheek, and the brightness to her eyes, and the smile to her lips. And year by year, as she grew up in that quiet home, almost unknown by anyone beyond it, she seemed to win more and more of her dead mother's grace

and gentleness, more of that womanly beauty, beauty of soul and spirit, which had once so brightened Rupert Guildenstern's life, and now came back in her child to brighten it again.

Eulie was just one of those quiet little creatures who seem made for love and caresses, who live and blossom in home's shelter, unnoticed by the gay world outside, until, led by some tender, loving hand, they pass forth in all their innocent freshness to make the brightness of a good man's life. There was enough archness about her to redeem her gentleness from insipidity, but not enough to make her either brilliant or dangerous. Indeed hers would always be the unconscious charm of simplicity and naturalness, rather than the fascination of striking beauty or the charm of the born coquette, whose apparent *insouciance* is the extremest polish of art. She was not made to shine abroad, and to create a sensation in fashionable circles. There her gentle unassuming manners

and ignorance of the ways of the world, would have brought her most likely nothing but good-natured pity, or at least a patronizing toleration; but he would be a happy man who won Eulie Guildenstern for his own, and kept her in the shelter which such as she love best, the shelter of home and quietness and peace.

Opal's was a rarer type, both of character and beauty. Shy, quiet, retiring as little Eulie, and even more so, hers was also that quick, proud sensitiveness which is so easily repelled by a cold word or look; which also as frequently repels by its own coldness, when the heart beneath is all glowing with kindness, silent only because it cannot speak. The unnatural loneliness of her childhood, and the influence of Amos Durben's tyranny, had wrought themselves very deeply into her nature, making it slow to show the love and trust which rayed out from Eulie's hazel eyes as lavishly as warmth and sunshine from a

summer sky. She belonged to those whose lot it is ever to feel more than they can tell, to hold the best part of their life, their tenderest longings, their finest impulses, hidden under a veil which those who cannot pierce it take for pride and exclusiveness, but which truly is woven by love's fine humility to hide what it thinks too poor for show or value. In truth, that which people called Opal Guildenstern's pride and reserve, was but the oversensitive lowliness which, because it cannot assume a front of careless equality with those who know, and more than know their own merits, seeks refuge in silence, and rather than be known for what it is not, refuses to be known at all.

It was as hard for Opal to reveal the richness and brightness of her nature, as for Eulie to conceal the warmth and tenderness of hers. She could not trust others sufficiently to believe that they cared for her,

that they were ready to give her what she was so willing to have given them, if an overstrained reserve had not held her back. Where Eulie gathered the love of others round her, and welcomed them to the fireside of her heart, Opal, equally yearning for that love, equally ready to repay it by the devotion of a heart whose stillness was but the stillness of intense activity, found herself left alone; those whom she would fain have won being repelled by the cold distrust, the shy, averted look which told so untruly of the depth of feeling within.

Doubtless Hagar Winter's training had greatly developed this trait in Opal's character; Hagar Winter, who once deceived, had never forgiven, never forgotten. Without intending to do any wrong, she had nevertheless, by many an unconscious look and tone of mistrust when speaking of others, fostered in the child's heart that spirit of doubt which

it would have been her wisdom to cast out and conquer. Just what Opal needed so much, she had failed to give, the tender love and sympathy which alone can draw its like from others, and create confidence strong, because never yet betrayed, and faith which trusts because it has never needed to doubt.

Perhaps this root of bitterness in Opal's heart might gradually have withered away if the influences of her new home had been perfectly healthful and harmonious. But with a child's instinctive penetration into character, aided by that mistrust which was ever ready to brood over a cold look or a gesture of indifference, she had divined Miss Armitage's feelings towards her. She knew that she was not thoroughly loved and trusted by Eulie's aunt. She knew, partly by her own observation, partly through hints dropped by Bessy Dobbinson, who lost no opportunity of

paying off her old grudge against the little orphan, that she was only tolerated in that home because Mr. Guildenstern willed her presence there; and Mr. Guildenstern's will was a law against which even Miss Armitage dare not set herself in defiance. That was enough to take the sunshine out of her life, and, by-and-by, to bitter every day of it with the consciousness of a dependence which could as yet be neither ended nor mended by any effort of her own.

If an unmixed welcome had been given her, if the shy, doubtful, sensitive little heart could from the very beginning have cast itself without one shadow of misgiving, on the good will of its new friends, then Opal might have grown up—not into a nobler woman, for the spirit of loving sacrifice which lies at the root of all nobility, lay deeply enough within her—but certainly into a happier

woman, a woman who would have won more love, if the winning of love, and not the giving of it, be life's best happiness.

CHAPTER XV.

MISS ARMITAGE'S cares increased considerably as her sister's children grew up to manhood and maidenhood.

She was a genuine woman of the world, hiding, under an exterior of bland, well-bred courtesy, as fair an amount of tact, skill, cleverness and contrivance as ever fell to the share of any of Eve's daughters. She was strongly impressed with the belief, common to all women who are invested with the responsibility of marriageable male relatives, that these said relatives must needs be regarded with a covetous eye by their unappropriated female friends. Therefore Miss Armitage felt it incumbent upon her to

guard the objects of this covetousness with a vigilance compared to which that of Argus was decidedly not worth mentioning.

She would have been a vastly more agreeable woman if she had had no male relatives to protect; or if, having them, she could have left them a little more to the care of that disposing Providence which she was so fond of talking about when she went to see the poor people in her district. But Miss Armitage preferred to be her own providence in family matters. She liked to have the reins in her own hands, and then she knew how things were going on. Ever since death deprived her brother-in-law of the best, most amiable of wives, it had been her unceasing effort to prevent him from being "snapped up," as she expressed it, by designing widows and spinsters, of whom she was perfectly certain there were numbers ready, notwithstanding his sadly altered fortunes, to step into the position

vacated now nearly twenty years ago by her poor dear sister.

Hitherto her efforts had been quite successful. The little family at Chesnut Cottage had been spared the infliction of a second female head; whether owing to its master's retiring habits or her own skill in social tactics, was uncertain, but Miss Armitage thought the latter. Not even the finger of village gossip, which nowhere moved more indefatigably than in the secluded parish of Morristhorpe, had pointed to any lady as a possible successor to the late lamented Mrs. Guildenstern. The doctor took his solitary rounds, smoked his cigar amongst the orchard trees or by his unblest fireside, as the case might be, in undisturbed repose, neither friend nor stranger suggesting the advisability of a change.

So far, so good. If only Miss Armitage could keep Lancelot as safely out of harm's way until she had met with a lady in every respect suit-

able for him, she should be quite content. But woe to that maiden, be she who she might, who, not having the advantages of position and fortune, which Miss Armitage considered indispensable, dared to look lovingly into Lancelot's eyes, or to win fair speech from him. Let her look out for storms. She would meet them surely enough.

Yet Miss Armitage considered herself a pattern of Christian propriety. She went to church regularly every Sunday morning, and when there was afternoon service she went in the afternoon too, which was a great deal more than many of the professing people in Morristhorpe did. And no one said the responses with more clock-like regularity, or with more brisk, vigorous resoluteness, let those responses convey the wailings of penitence, or the jubilate of the aspiring soul, or the deep, sad yearning of the guilty one. All came alike to her. It was her place to say them, and she said them

like a woman. After that she had nothing more to do with them. She would have gazed with lady-like surprise into the face of anyone who had the audacity to hint to her that there was something like inconsistency in putting up a prayer for deliverance from envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness, and next day picking holes during a morning call in the character of some absent parishioner; or in asking that all who professed and called themselves Christians, might keep the faith in the bond of peace, and then spreading abroad some cruel insinuation relative to the character of an unfriended woman whom she suspected of a desire to "snap up" one of her precious male relatives. Miss Armitage liked prayers, in common with all other things, to be kept in their place. There was a place for everything, she said, and the parish church was the place for prayers. When you had said them, you had done with them. At least, if

she did not say that in actual words, she said it in actual practice, which amounted to the same.

But to return to the worthy lady's family cares.

She had never been without a certain lingering, unexpressed fear that Lancelot, a proud, bright, intelligent lad, of strong will, too, and with much controlled force of character about him, should be drawn with more than brotherly affection towards Opal, between whom and himself there was that subtle attraction which natures alike in some points and widely apart in others, never fail to exert upon each other.

Since Lancelot returned from Belgium, at the close of his school career, she had carefully watched over his movements, with the design of preventing too great an intimacy between the foster-brother and sister. And later, when he became a resident in the Temple, she had always so arranged matters that Opal should either be at school or visiting friends during his vacations.

So far, her arrangements had succeeded admirably. What a clever woman of the world like Miss Armitage undertakes, she generally manages to accomplish. Lancelot was nearly at the close of his law course now, and yet with the exception of Christmas-tide, when matters could not be otherwise contrived, he and Opal had never been left to each other's society for more than a day or two at a time. Now, if she could only arrange things as cleverly for a few months longer, until Lancelot was settled down in his London chambers, all would be perfectly safe.

Besides, she had her own little plans for the future of her favourite nephew, and with those plans Opal must not be allowed to interfere.

Miss Luxmore, niece to old Septimus Russell, had lately come to take up her residence with her uncle and aunt in the great house on the village green. Miss Luxmore was young, tolerably good-looking, accomplished, with a judicious dash of worldliness about her, just enough to

carry her comfortably through life; and a splendid fortune, such a fortune as could scarcely be matched in Morristhorpe, though the pedigree that went with it was capable of improvement. But then ancestry was not everything. Lancelot himself, though belonging to a highly respectable family, was not in a position to sacrifice pecuniary considerations to an imposing pedigree in his choice of a wife. Money, for a young man beginning life, was indispensable. And Miss Armitage must say she should think she had done her duty admirably by her poor dear sister's son if she could succeed in bringing about a match between him and old Septimus Russell's wealthy niece.

Because of course money *was* indispensable. If Lancelot had chosen to follow his father's profession, as the eldest son of the Morristhorpe Guildensterns had done for the last fifty years, and then settled down to the village practice,

things would have been very different. His work would have been ready for him, and his income too; for the Morristhorpe practice was both remunerative and extensive, no other medical man residing in the place, or being likely to come to it; until now, Lancelot the only son having decided not to take it up, it must pass into the hands of a stranger. But Miss Armitage could not blame him. He had a high spirit, like all the Guildenstern men. His father's altered position galled him. No wonder that he wished to be away from the place, with all its humiliating associations, and make a fresh start in life, where he would not be so continually reminded of the past. The best of Mr. Guildenstern's life was in the past. At his age men neither enjoy nor suffer so keenly. Besides, he was always reserved, never seemed dependent upon society or outside appearance; he was content so long as he had

his children about him. But Lancelot had a young man's pride. He wanted to make a position for himself, and he could not make it in the place where their fortunes had so sadly fallen, within sight of the house where they had once lived in ease and in affluence, within sight of that other house, too, through the crimes of whose owner it was that their prospects had been blighted.

And then Miss Armitage used to launch forth, with all the eloquence of which she was capable, against Captain Darque and the villainy but for which the Guildenstern name might still have held itself so worthily in the village of Morrishorpe.

The match which she had in her thoughts would be an advantageous one for both parties. Lancelot's talents were far above the average, and would certainly, in the course of a few years, place him at the head of his profession. Miss Luxmore's fortune, to be paid

without reservation into her own hands, or those of her husband, on her wedding-day, would serve to keep the young couple in elegant competency, until such time as Lancelot should be able to establish himself. Of course he must be content to wait for briefs; young barristers always had to do that, however shining their talents, and however brilliant their connections. And since he had no pecuniary resources of his own to tide him over this intermediate stage, there was all the more pressing need for him to choose a wife who would supply the deficiency, and give him the means of sustaining a position whose after advantages she would herself enjoy.

But it was no use saying a word to Mr. Guildenstern. As Miss Armitage repeated to herself over and over again, men never had any sort of discretion in such matters, and he was just one of those let-well-alone, unworldly creatures who never think of putting out a finger

to secure anything advantageous, either for themselves or other people. It would be worse than madness to take him into her confidence about the little plan which she had arranged so nicely in her own mind. If she did anything of that sort, as likely as not he would go and tell Lancelot all about it, the very next time the young man came home; and then the whole affair would come to nothing. For Lancelot himself was terribly self-willed. If once he became possessed of the idea that she was trying to manage him, there would be an end to everything. She must just keep her own counsel, take advantage of circumstances as they handed out, and by judicious silence bring about what injudicious words could never accomplish.

Of one thing, however, she was quite certain, that for her nephew to make a favourable impression on Miss Luxmore would be a splendid start for him in a worldly point of

view; and so far as contrivance of hers could help forward that favourable impression, it should not be wanting.

CHAPTER XVI.

AS for Eulie, Miss Armitage took refuge in the thought that her niece would not want arranging for at present. She was barely seventeen, quite young enough to think seriously of settling in life. And besides, she was one of those bright, pretty, engaging little creatures who generally go off in spite of poverty and simplicity, and all other worldly disadvantages.

No fear, Miss Armitage assured herself, of Eulie not making a good match. Though she was as innocent as possible, and did not seem to have the slightest idea of putting herself forward, as some girls with not half her prettiness would have done, still she was sure to get

on. Miss Armitage dare venture to say that, before she was out of her teens, Mr. Guildenstern would have plenty of suitors hanging about the house after her, though really she could not fix upon anyone just at present as decidedly eligible, unless it might be young Harry Freestone, the clergyman's son, who had seemed a good deal taken with her at the last harvest festival decoration. For as Lancelot had been away from home so long, and Mr. Guildenstern was such a quiet, unsociable sort of man, not able to keep much company, or take his daughter into it either, she was not known amongst the neighbouring families as she deserved to be; as indeed she ought to be, if her papa had a proper regard for her future position. Still, there was no need to be anxious about Eulie just yet. She might safely be let alone for a year or two longer, until Lancelot's affairs were in a safe track for prosperity.

He had nearly finished his law course now. At the end of the next term he was to come home for a few weeks, before commencing his professional career in earnest. If Miss Armitage could only get Opal safely disposed of during that time, and foster a judicious intimacy between Eulie and Miss Luxmore, such an intimacy as might give Lancelot an opportunity of frequently seeing the young lady and producing a favourable impression, which before his final settlement in London might ripen into something decisive, she should be quite content.

She could trust Eulie, though a very simple-hearted, innocent girl, to take care of herself somehow, but young men required a great deal of looking after to get them into the right track. They were so blind and awkward in anything which required the exercise of tact or management. If those who knew them better than they knew themselves, and were well acquainted with their tempers and dispositions, and

could see exactly what sort of companions would be likely to suit them, did not exert a measure of judicious oversight on their behalf, they were as likely as not to make a fatal mistake in their choice for life; fix upon the most unsuitable person in the world, and so have to repent to the end of their days of a calamity which might have been so easily avoided by some practical female friend stepping in at the right time, and directing their thoughts to the right person.

So reasoned within herself Miss Armitage, paragon of feminine tact and contrivance, as she sat in Mr. Guildenstern's dining-room one pleasant spring morning, trimming up her second best bonnet for the season.

But, alas for the best concerted schemes of human ingenuity! The very next morning there came a letter marked "immediate," from Miss Armitage's married brother in Liverpool; a letter whose contents were destined entirely

to interfere with the excellent lady's plans and purposes.

Mrs. John Armitage was very ill, indeed almost dangerously so, with an attack of low fever, and the poor children, five of them, were left without benefit of maternal supervision. Would Aunt Fanny come over for a week or two or a month, and keep the house together until Mrs. John was able to get about again? Her brother would consider it the greatest kindness if Mr. Guildenstern would spare her to them for a little while, for he was so much engaged in business during the day, and so engrossed with attendance upon his wife when he came home, that really the children were becoming ruined for want of the judicious restraint which no one could exercise upon them better than Aunt Fanny. If she could manage to come to them the very next day, Mr. Armitage himself would come to the station to meet her, and would do everything to render her stay with

them as pleasant under the circumstances as possible.

Miss Armitage knew from past experience what her rich well-to-do merchant brother meant by making her visit "pleasant." A cheque for forty or fifty pounds was a very little matter to him. Besides, she could not resist the appeal to her judiciousness. It was the quality above all others upon which she prided herself, and to have an opportunity of exercising it was her glory. And then slow fevers were not such very terrible things when managed skilfully, as she knew how to manage them. Most likely Sister John would be all right again, or at any rate able to resume the charge of her family, in two or three weeks at the latest; and as Lancelot was not coming home until the middle of May, she should not be leaving him very long, or perhaps not at all, to his own devices.

Accordingly, without having had time to set

on foot an intimacy between Eulie and Miss Luxmore, or indeed to do anything but put her things hastily into a portmanteau, Miss Armitage set off to Cardington next morning to take the train to Liverpool.

If Sister John's affliction had been anything but fever, she would certainly have taken Opal with her, and so have protected Lancelot from actual danger on the one hand, if she could not have convoyed him into a safe haven on the other. But she was quite sure it was no use mentioning such a thing to Mr. Guildenstern; for though he never made much fuss over Opal, he thought a great deal about her; and would on no account allow her to be exposed to needless danger. And even if he could have been coaxed into permission, that coaxing would have involved an explanation of the circumstances which rendered Opal's departure advisable; and men were always so stupid in little matters of that sort. They never seemed

to be in the slightest degree alive to chances and possibilities which women saw through at a glance. She did not believe it had ever entered into her brother Guildenstern's mind that either of his children could have a thought about settling in life. And as for making things straight for them in that direction, blocking up undesirable avenues and opening the way towards such as were suitable, she dare venture her yearly income upon it that he could not have done such a thing to save his life.

So she took her departure to Liverpool alone, having previously decided that Sister John was not to be laid up for more than three weeks at the very most, before which time her services would not be indispensable at home, in consequence of Lancelot's absence. Fifty miles from Cardington she had to stay for ten minutes at a junction station, on the platform of which, had she not been so absorbed in her

nephew's matrimonial interests as to be unconscious of outward circumstances, she might have seen a broad-shouldered, sun-burnt young fellow, with a whole regiment of rugs and portmanteaus, waiting for the next train to Cardington.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE broad-shouldered young fellow was Gilbert Lester. His ship had only anchored the night before in Liverpool Docks, and without waiting to send letter or telegram to his friends at Morristhorpe, he had taken the first morning train, and was coming down upon them "promiscus," as the country people said.

The bright, open-browed boy, who used to play with Lancelot and Eulie Guildenstern twelve years ago, in Mr. Lester's bit of meadow land under the shadows of Morristhorpe Grange, had developed into a stalwart man, equally bright and open-browed, with a clear, honest, straightforward glance, an upright bearing

which, if it lacked the finest touch of aristocratic finish, did not lack one touch of that fearless independence and brave chivalry which everywhere mark nature's gentleman.

For all the rest, the boy had been true father of the man. Gilbert had become just what anyone who knew him well in his school-days might have expected from him. Honest, outspoken, rather brusque, simple almost to quietness in his ways and manners, there was an utter absence of French polish about him, which, if he had not had the richest farm and the finest old home in Morristhorpe to fall back upon, might slightly have damaged his chances of success with the young ladies of the place. For whatever else they might do, those young ladies could not with the slightest show of propriety go into raptures over him as being "so exquisitely refined, so perfectly the gentleman, you know."

He hired a horse and trap from the Carding-

ton station hotel, and was soon tooling along with his rugs and portmanteaus down that Morristhorpe turnpike road, along which, five years ago, a beardless youth of eighteen, he had driven with his father to take the Liverpool train, trying very hard to behave like a man, and make himself believe that the choking in his throat, and the mist that would keep coming before his eyes, were only the effects of the frosty January air.

Now he was coming back, not much more than a youth in years even yet, but a man in experience of the world, in knowledge of men and manners. With the child-heart still, though, the simple unassuming ways, which had long ago made him such a favourite with the village people. With the boyish frankness, too, the strong yet gentle kindness which won little Eulie's heart in those old days when they all used to play together in the Mere farm plantations, or gather for story-telling by the nursery

fireside in that old home behind the chestnut trees.

Just past the turnpike gate he came in sight of Joe Bletchley, who was going home to his dinner after a morning's spell of work in Squire Lester's fold yard. Joe was getting an old man now, and his knees were stiff with rheumatism; and it was not very much that he could do in field or yard labour. But he took as great a pride in the place as ever; and held as strongly to the notion that the Squire could not get along without him; and he had a way of talking about the land and the crops and the stock, and the general prosperity of the place, as if all was the result of his own special and peculiar effort. It was never anything but "me and the Squire" when, in his capacity of foreman, Joe had to give orders to the rest of the labourers. And Mr. Lester, who honoured the old man for his work's sake, kindly gave in to this little bit of weakness on the part of one

who had served him more faithfully than the younger generation of Morristhorpe labourers were likely to do.

Gilbert knew his father's foreman again. Five years of good living and easy working had only deepened the innocent little bit of colour at the end of his nose, and bent his broad back and built up an additional chin to the others which, for twenty years, had formed so substantial a base to his rustic physiognomy.

"Ahoy, there!" shouted Gilbert, as Joe hobbled on before them in the very middle of the turnpike road. "Just turn to one side, will you, and make tracks for little Gilbert."

Joe did not hear the last words, being too much excited by the rapid approach of the imposing Cardington trap, with its up-heaped cargo of rugs and luggage, to take note of anything else. He just stood still in the middle of the road, gazing half indignantly, yet with a

certain bucolic reverence, at the unwonted appearance of such a splendid turn-out in quiet little Morrishorpe.

“Tracks, sir ; and what may them be?” And then, his natural instinct warning him that he must get out of the road as quickly as possible, he stumped away towards the footpath with such speed as his rheumatism and fifteen stones of flesh would permit. “Tracks? I can make as straight a track with a plow as any man in this here parish ; for there isn’t a better hand at field work in all Squire Lester’s farm, though I say it myself, than Joe Bletchley ; and if you can’t take my word you may ask the Squire hisself, as I’ve worked for him this fifty year, ay, and more, him and his father before him ; and a better bit of land for a man to give hisself to there isn’t in all this parish. And if you’d axed me to stand out o’ t’ road, I could ha’ done it without giving you the trouble to over

your words again, as there's a vast o' folk thinks once speaking enough."

"Come, come, Joe, don't get cross about it. I know you're one of the best men on the Mere farm; and you see you looked so light upon your feet, I thought you could nip over the road in no time. You've spread out wonderfully in the last five years. Don't you know little Gilbert again?"

"Nay, nay," and Joe shook his head as much as to say that though he was somewhat the worse for wear, and not able to see quite so far before him as he used to do in the days of his youth, still he had a measure of natural ability left even yet, and knew as well as ever when anyone was trying to impose upon him.

"Nay, nay, master, you'll none come over me that way. You've growed a vast in them there parts, then, for there's more of you nor what would make two o' the little Gilberts

as I used to toss at the top o' the corn-waggon twelve year ago next harvest."

"Why, Joe, you see, it's good growing land in the new country. Bless you! they reckon to get two crops of hay off their meadows in a year, and it would go hard if the men didn't come on accordingly."

"Well, sir, if that there land's had the raising of you, I don't misdoubt but what the men does come forrads double in imperence if they don't make much way in nought else. But one crop o' that's enough in a year, and over much too for them as starts with such a fairish lot as you've gotten."

Gilbert laughed, such a merry, honest, roistering laugh, that old Joe looked up in bewilderment. Could it indeed be the little lad after all, for he had never heard a laugh like that since Gilbert went away five years ago, and he never expected to hear it again, until Squire Lester welcomed the young mas-

ter, whose home-coming was so often talked about now.

"Come, Joe, don't keep on the other side of the hedge that way. Don't make out you've forgotten me. Why, you were one of the cleverest hands on the farm, you know, worth all the others put together, weren't you, now? You see I know you as well as you know yourself. Can't you see anything of little Gilbert about me?"

And young Lester took off his wide-awake, revealing a fine shock of brown hair, curling over a forehead as smooth and unruffled as one of Squire Lester's best corn-fields just before harvest-time.

Joe stared in blank astonishment for a second or two; then, a sudden blaze of recognition lighting up his old face, he hobbled up to the trap, and bringing down his great rough hand with a resounding thump on Gilbert's, said,

“Blessings on him! It is the young master, after all. Law! what a vast more there is on him now nor what there’d used to be. And me a-speaking tull him about his imper-
ence! But you know Joe Bletchley, Master Gilbert—his bark’s worse nor his bite any day; and I allers goes the wrong side o’ the road when it gets nighhand yittling time. I shouldn’t ha’ said nought tull ye but what was proper, nobbut I’d had my sup of broth and my pipe and things comfortable, as my old woman has ’em for me when I comes home to the time. And here’s a welcome home to ye, Master Gilbert, and a long life and a bonnie wife; for, if ye haven’t changed since the old times, it’s just yourself as deserves ’em both, and I hope you’ll get ’em, God willing.”

“Thank you, Joe. I hope I shall.”

Gilbert bent his head reverently, then blushed like a maiden in her teens. But Joe never

saw the light in the young man's blue eyes
as he looked across the Morristhorpe meadows
to the old house behind the chestnut trees.

CHAPTER XVIII.

“**A**ND now, Joe,” said Gilbert, “come up alongside and tell us all about everything. Here, driver, you can go to the back, whilst the old man and I have a bit of chat.”

“Nay, nay, sir;” and Joe Bletchley shuffled away with a bow and a scrape. “I allers knowed my place better nor to put myself alongside of the quality like that there. I haven’t worked on the Mere farm this more’n fifty year, man and boy, without learning to show proper respect to them as owns the land, and that as good as it is, as there isn’t better in all the parish of Morristhorpe. It’s never Joe Bletchley as’ll set hisself up with

the Squire's son in the like of such a carriage as that. I'll go along, sir, if you please, on my own stumps; and though I'm nobbut an ould man, I'm steady on my feet, and always was, since I parted company with the drink, and if you'll slacken speed a bit I can keep up."

"Just as you like, Joe. You were always fond of your own way, and so was I; and my way now is to go along to the farm with you; and so, if Joe Bletchley won't ride with Gilbert Lester, why, Gilbert Lester must walk with Joe Bletchley. Here, driver, you take this baggage to the Mere farm, and say the owner of it will be along by and by."

And with that Gilbert jumped down, and was soon measuring his young steps with those of Joe Bletchley on the turnpike road.

"That's just yourself, Master Gilbert, and nobody else," said Joe, with a look of affectionate reverence towards the stalwart young.

squire. "I lay a penny there isn't another man in Morristhorpe parish, unless it's your father hisself—which being in the family is all the same—would ha' comed down from the like o' that grand set-out and took to the turnpike with an ould nobbler like this here. I see them there furrin parts hasn't spoiled you."

"All for self, Joe, all for self, like everything else that's done in this world. I wanted to hear what you had to say about the people at home; and I shall get along just as soon by this near cut as the trap will along the high road. And then, you know, my mother will get word a little before I come; or maybe she might be a bit upset. She doesn't know that I've landed yet."

"Just like yourself again, sir!" and Joe drew a step nearer his young master. "I allers said there was never a one in this parish comed near Squire Lester's son for knowing how to do what was properest. But I'm afraid, sir, you've

comed a bit afore your welcome ; for the master and missis is gone to a flower-show, or summut o' that sort at Cardington ; and they don't reckon to be back afore evening. For the Squire says to me, ' Joe,' says he, afore he set off, ' you give an eye to them men now, and don't let there be no idling while I'm gone ;' and I allers knows that means he won't be back while a good bit."

" You see, Master Gilbert ;" and Joe nudged the young man confidentially ; he was beginning to feel quite at home with him now—" you see, with me being so long on the place, the rest of 'em kind o' looks up tull me same as they wouldn't do if I was a young man like their-selves. Mr. Lester knows he can trusten me to do a good day's work, let him be near or let him be far, for that matter ; and there's never no idling going on while I've got the say to stop it. No, nor I don't let 'em be over free with their tongues neither, as there's many of

'em, once you give 'em a bit o' liberty that way, they never know when to stop. But as I was agoing to ax you—law! now, Master Gilbert, what was it I was agoing to ax you?"

There was a world of roguish merriment in Gilbert's eyes as he answered,

"I daresay you were going to ask me if the Canada farmers raised two crops of talk on their meadows in a year, or whether I'd ever met with a woman out there who could hold her tongue. Was that it, eh, Joe?"

"Ah! you're a making fun of me, Master Gilbert. You was allers such a boy for a bit of fun! And I won't say but it was the hardest thing ever I had to do to stop myself, once I got fairly set agate. I learns it of my missis, that's where I learns it. You know, sir, a man can't be along with a woman what's allers talking, without picking up the same way, and I says to her, Betsy, says I, do hould still and let me put in a bit; but law! sir, it

isn't no good. You might as well try to stop the corn agrowing as say ought to a woman that's once got agate with her tongue. I oft wish I'd lit of somebody as knew how to keep still, so as I might have had a bit of chance myself to say what I'd got to say.

"Not but what," added Joe, apologetically, "we're comfortable enough, the missis and me; but it stands to reason a man do like to hear hisself talk, which is what my old woman don't give me so much as she ought to do; and me not as you may say a man as wants a deal of that sort o' thing; for when I'm settled with my pipe and a bit of something to wet it, as I allers says a pipe's nothing unless you've a bit of something to wet it, only you keep on the safe side, sir; it's everything to keep on the safe side, sir; but as I was going to say, hadn't I better step forward a bit and send the house lad to Cardington after Squire and Missis, to tell 'em you've comed? Law! it wouldn't

be all the flower-shows in the word would keep 'em back, nobbut they knew Master Gilbert was home to the Mere farm."

"No, thank you, Joe. You needn't trouble yourself. I'll just take it quietly. It would only put mother about if the house-lad was to go and startle her. She would think something was the matter. Are they both very well?"

"Yes sir, for that matter, as well as the best son in the world could wish 'em. But just a bit older—a bit older, Master Gilbert. You see, sir, it stands to reason five year must make a difference, particlar when folks has got as you may say over the top of the hill, and the Missis never to call as strong as a many at the best of times. But she nips about the house wonderful, when all's said and done, and looks as spry as a canary, only she's forced to leave a bit more to the maids nor what she used to; for she was allers a woman, Master Gilbert, was your mother, as would never let anybody else's

finger go into her pie while she were able to set hands to it herself."

Gilbert thought the same remark would apply to Joe Bletchley, when the pie in question was one of words ; but he did not say so, and Joe went on cheerily as ever.

"I said to her a bit since when I went to take my orders from the master, and she was agate in the dairy, Mrs. Lester says I—for you see, Master Gilbert, having been so long on the land, and me as good at a bit o' mowing or harvesting or ought o' that sort, though I say it myself, as any man in the parish, not to call it a deal better, and both of 'em knowing as I'm to be depended upon for work same as many isn't now a days, the Missis lets me speak to her a bit freer nor what she might if I was one o' them sort as only works for what they can get—and Mrs. Lester, says I, I've been thinking it 'ud be uncommon handy for you, now the tail end of the day has come,

as we must all look to have it come to us—though I will say, Master Gilbert, your mother carries her age as well as any woman in this lordship—Mrs. Lester, says I, it would be uncommon handy for you if you had a daughter or something of that sort, just to take the thick of the work off your hands, and give you your ease, as one may say.”

“A very sensible speech, Joe;” and Gilbert looked away with a smile on his ruddy face to the house among the chestnut trees.

“Yes, sir, I don’t know as I could have made a sensibler, and I always reckon to be as good for sensibleness as most o’ the men, let alone the women, as one doesn’t count to have it nat’ral. And she looked at me, did your mother—for she isn’t like the most of women, isn’t your mother, no, that she isn’t—she looked at me with a glint in her blue eyes, same as I’ve seen in yours, Master Gilbert, many and many a time, when you was a little boy; for I always did say

you was your mother's own child for looks, and her as viewly a woman as any in the parish, only there was just a streak o' sadness in 'em this time, and says she to me, Joe, says she, I'm thinking Gilbert will look after that for me before long. I daresay he wont let me want for a daughter when father and I get settled at the new house in Cardington, and he has the farm to himself."

"It might be a great comfort to her, now I come to think about it," said Gilbert meditatively.

"Ay, that would it. And truth to tell, there's many a lady 'ud be proud to join hands with you, and you that thought of in the village, you and your father and your grandfather afore you, as there isn't another family in Morris-thorpe parish has more say, nor deserves it more nor what you do. It isn't far you'd have to go, I'll be bound, if it did happen you'd set your thoughts that way, as it's nat'ral a young

man ought to do, especially when things lies as handy as I reckon they do for you."

"You see, sir," continued Joe, looking up into his young master's face, as though not quite certain how far he might safely go in this new track—"you see, sir, with being so long in the family, and me not being as you may say a man as nobbut works for what he can get, it's oft lay strong upon my mind as you'd be looking out for that sort o' thing when the time come as the master and missis wanted to side out and be to theirselves; and there's a vast here 'ud be glad enough if they knew you was set that way. There's Miss Luxmore, her as lives with her uncle at the top end o' the village, and used to come with her aunt to have tea with your mother when she were a little gal, afore you went away a good bit, and your mother's kep' it up, and so has Mrs. Russell too, particler since the young leddy come home from school. And

the money they do say she's gotten—why, sir, if it's money as makes a difference——”

“You shut up, Joe. I'll have no more of that,” said Gilbert, facing about suddenly and silencing the old man with a glance of bright, keen, straightforward rebuke.

“I ax your pardon, sir. I'm sure I meant no offence.”

“All right, Joe, for that. Only you've got upon a wrong track. You'd better be quiet.”

And Joe *was* quiet. Something in Gilbert's manner told him he had gone a little too far. After that, neither of them spoke for some time. It was almost more than Joe could manage to keep up with the young Squire, who, with head erect and cap lifted to let the May breeze play amongst his hair, was striding along at a genuine Canadian pace.

At last—and if Joe had not been still turning over in his own mind the desirability of Miss Luxmore as a daughter-in-law for Mrs. Les-

ter, he might have gathered something from the question, coming as it did after that previous turn in the conversation—Gilbert said,

“And how are the Guildensterns, Joe?”

“Much the same, sir,” replied Joe, brightening up wonderfully when he found that Gilbert was not seriously offended by his freedom of speech. “Much the same. Alive and well. Old gentleman going about in his gig same as us’l, which he didn’t need to do now if it wasn’t for the mess Cap’n Darque got him into with them nasty mines. It’s been a bad business, has that, sir, for our doctor, and they say it isn’t his life that’ll see things straightened, neither. You see, they keep tewing at him, does them folks as belongs to the mines, for more money, while it’s all ever he can do to keep things together, and get Mr. Lancelot pushed on. He’s doing fairish, though, is the young man—summat in the law, as I hear tell. You and he used to be rare and fond

of each other, Master Gilbert, when you was little uns."

"Yes; and a downright good fellow he was too, only so confoundedly sharp. It was an awful long way to get round Lancelot Guildenstern. I know I never half did it. And there was a little sister too," continued Gilbert, trying to speak as though the little sister was quite a secondary consideration.

"Yes, sir, there was. Little Miss Eulie they called her, and little Miss Eulie she'll be, I reckon, as long as she stops where she is, for she's that sort as you don't seem as if you could put no other name to her. A bonnie slip of a lassie, just her mother over again, as I can tell of her, six and twenty years ago, when she first come to this parish, new married to the big house, Morristhorpe doctor proper house, nighhand the rectory, and Mr. Guildenstern kep' his carriage and rode out single with her and that sort. Law, Master

Gilbert, but things is changed a vast, and all along o' them nasty mines. I don't wonder Miss Armitage gives it out real spiteful again Cap'n Darque, as they say she do, nobbut let his name be spoke nighhand her."

"Yes. That was a bad concern. I thought perhaps Miss Guildenstern might be going to be married."

"No, sir, not as I knows on. And I should know it as soon as anyone in the parish, for my son Ben married Bessy Dobbinson, her as lived nurse girl to Miss Eulie when she were little, and she's kind o' kep it up with 'em ever since, going to help 'em when they're throng and that sort, and I never heerd no tell of Miss Eulie having no gentleman after her. You see, sir, it was an awkward thing Mr. Guildenstern lossing his money with them mines, and making it as Miss Eulie won't have a sixpence to bless herself with, and young ladies as hasn't fortins doesn't go off easy now-a-days. You

see, sir, it stands to reason a man likes a bit o' summut solid when he's looking out for a wife to settle with, and I don't blame him. I should do just same if I was a gentleman born. When there's plenty on 'em to pick from, it 'ud be a queer thing if them didn't get picked first as had a bit more nor good looks and good temper to set 'em off with. Good looks is good and good temper's better, but a bit o' money's best of all when a man's doing for hisself that way. And then, sir, you know——"

Joe was about to expatiate upon Miss Luxmore's excellences again, looked at in a financial point of view; but remembering Gilbert's previous reception of that subject, he wisely shifted to another track.

"I was agoing to say, there's the other young lady, her as Mr. Guildenstern took when she were a little un and evened her along with his own, and does for her just the same, and you may see them going out together like

two roses on one stalk, as you may say, for beauty; only the bit of money wanting, which it's a pity they haven't got, and a shame too, for that matter; for the Morrithorpe doctor's always been a man as could keep his head above water, and show as good a set-out as any in the parish, and if it hadn't been for yon villain as nobody knows where he is, nor what he's doing, there needn't have been a better to do man in this lordship; and the carriage kep, and company, and the big house, Morrithorpe doctor proper house, and everything as his father used to have it afore him.

“But you're going the wrong road, sir, axin your pardon,” continued Joe, as Gilbert was making his way towards the village green, instead of going straight on to Squire Lester's bridle road. “It's a deal the nigh handest way to the Mere farm straight across the meadows. This here'll bring you to Mr.

Guildenstern's, and that's a vast round for winning to the Squire's."

"Never mind, Joe. There's nobody at home, you know, to give me a welcome if I do go the nearest way, and I may as well stop and see a little more of the village before I turn in. Not much altered, Joe, is it, since father and I drove down here five years ago to Cardington station? Railway cut up that bit of meadow land a little, but for all the rest——"

And Gilbert looked round him with an air of interest, as though he had turned into that footpath, which led past the doctor's house, for no other purpose than to indulge himself in a survey of the beauties of the village, and the little bit of railway embankment which had been thrown up at the bottom of his father's seventeen acre lot. To do Gilbert justice, however, even this little bit of deceit sat uncomfortably upon him, and he began to look

supremely awkward as Joe replied, innocently enough, looking only at the prospect, not at the conscious blush on Gilbert's honest brown face,

"No more it is, sir; and no need as it should be, according to my thinking. I hate a place as allers wants something doing to it to make it respectable. Why, sir, I lay a penny you might go a pretty far piece before you'd light on a bit o' land better nor what we've got here in this parish, whether it's for corn or whether it's for the clover cropping, or whether it's for turning out the beasts to grass in, or whatever it is. And when we've got the thick of the water drained off, as they're agate with it now, at the far end of Morrishorpe wash, I reckon it's one crop'll better them two as you was a crackin' of a bit since in them there furrin parts. It's land is this here as a man may be proud to do his duty to, and never overdriven as it isn't with crops while it hasn't time to rest

itself. It does me good to see a bit o' land like this here, and if ever I do feel as if I didn't want to better myself, it's when I get agate in them meadows of the Squire's as there isn't a man in the place knows how to put a scythe into 'em better nor what I do, ay, and works up to the very last minute, as a many doesn't do; for it was nobbut last hay harvest your father says to me, Joe, says he—but law, sir I was agoing to say summut else—what was it now I was agoing to say—afore I were set on about the land.”

“Can't tell, Joe; but never mind—I'll hear it another time. The morning's getting on, and you'll be late to your old woman. I think I'll just step in here and ask Guildenstern's man to give me a light to my cigar. I suppose I shall find a man about the place somewhere.”

“If you don't you ought to, sir, and him a doctor and people coming to the house at

all times for life or death; but if it's a light you want, there's my son just up the top of the lane would be proud to make you welcome to one, and him home to his vittles as he will be now, according to the time o' day. There isn't a man in the place, sir, 'ud be prouder to give you a light, and make you welcome to stop and rest yourself, nor my son Ben."

"Well, no, thank you, Joe. I can get it here just as well, I daresay," replied Gilbert coming to a halt at the corner of the old house among the chestnut trees, where he and Lancelot and Eulie had had many a merry game of play in the days gone by; "and—and don't think I'll trouble you to wait for me. You see it might be some time before I happened to see a man about."

And Gilbert looked awkward again, though he tried to whistle it off.

"Don't mention that, sir," said Joe, who dis-

-isthorpe village with anybody
 lity, and him talking to me
 I might ha' been as good
 misdoubt but what
 or ought o' that
 sets on. need to turn my
 ng, I reckon, to doing a good
 ed. I'll just stand about my proper
 be ready." there

"Well, no, thank you, Joe," said *him* vel-
 still drawing towards the little narrow *box*
 road which led down to Mr. Guildenstern's
 orchard, though he knew well enough that
 the doctor's stable-man never troubled that
 part of the premises. "I think I'd rather you
 didn't wait; you see I might be a long time
 if I didn't happen to see anyone about; and
 —and, but you'll be at my father's again to-
 night."

"All right, sir; and I'll wish you a very
 good morning, then, and a welcome home and

the rest, if it isn't no offence mentioning it, as it's a likely thing enough to come about; and you that thought of in the parish as there isn't another to come nigh you, unless it might be the Squire hisself. Good morning, sir, and good luck to you."

"Good morning Joe."

And away Joe Bletchley stumped, past the churchyard towards the less aristocratic part of the village, saying as he did so—for Joe's private soliloquies were not always so permeated with the element of honest, well-meaning blarney as those with which he indulged his master's only son—

"If I'd have known he meant leaving of me here, I might ha' parted company with him at yon end of the Squire's bit o' meadow land; for it's a vast nearer hand nor what this here road is; and my missis sitting and worretting as she always is if I'm a bit late to my vittles. Nobbut it isn't every day one gets chance to

walk down Morristhorpe village with anybody as belongs the quality, and him talking to me all the time that free I might ha' been as good as hisself, which I don't misdoubt but what I am, if it's a bit o' mowing or ought o' that sort as wants doing. I don't need to turn my back of anyone in the parish for doing a good day's work, and knowing how to pay proper respect to the land. And my son Ben there too, as would have lit him his cigar as welcome as any of Mr. Guildenstern's folks, for that matter. Stop a bit, though. Ay, *that's* it!"

And Joe Bletchley came to a sudden halt in the middle of the road, and stroked his three chins one after another with a meditative air.

"That's it!"

Then he hitched up his corduroys, gave his smock a vigorous pull over his shoulders, and set off again at full speed towards the cottage

where his old woman was "worreting" over the unpunctuality of her lord and master.

"I've got it! It's Miss Eulie. That's just what it's going to be. And maybe couldn't be better neither, though if he'd happened to ha' lighted on a bit o' money along with it, there's some would have called him a sensibler man. It's a good thing, is a bit o' money, when it goes along with other things as is reasonable."

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.





